A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF STRESS PERCEPTION AND REACTIONS TO

STRESS IN URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

AN ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED ON THE TWELVTH DAY OF AUGUST 2014

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

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Abstract

The goal of this qualitative study was to use archival data from a participatory action research (PAR) project to construct a local, culturally informed model of African American children and adolescents' stressors and reactions to stress specifically representative of an elementary and a secondary school in New Orleans, Louisiana. Low-income urban African American youth face chronic conditions including economic problems, exposure to community violence, racial stereotyping and discrimination rare in the lives of youth of other communities, yet the extent to which extant findings on stress can be generalized to this population is unclear. Focus group data from students from grades K-2 (n = 42) and grades 9-10 (n = 44) in two charter schools in New Orleans were coded deductively to identify stressors and stress reactions in this sample. Themes across the two groups were examined for patterns in the data that explain variations in definitions of stress and reactions to stress due to age and ecological contexts (e.g. family, school, peer group). Understanding stressors and reactions to stress is a first step in working toward planning culturally relevant and culturally acceptable intervention programs to equip the students to effectively deal with stress, provide resources and, create conditions for them to cope adaptively.

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A Qualitative Study of Stress Perception and Reactions to Stress in Urban African American Children and Adolescents

Stress is an integral part of life. It is experienced at every age, and at every age individuals try to cope with it. A wealth of literature on stress shows that there are genetic, biological, psychological and social mediating pathways through which stressful life circumstances take their toll on mental, social and physical functioning (Folkman, 2011).Successful adaptation to stress includes the ways in which individuals manage their emotions, think constructively, regulate and direct their behavior, control their autonomic arousal, and act on the social and nonsocial environments to alter or decrease sources of stress. These processes have all been included to varying degrees within the construct of coping (Compas, et al 2001). The resources available to cope with stress and the manner in which individuals actually cope are important factors influencing positive growth and development as opposed to the onset of a host of psychological and somatic problems (Compas,1987). Coping is one of the few variables in the stress process that lends itself to intervention; it is a critical point of entry for protecting mental and physical health from the harmful effects of stress (Folkman, 2011).

Problem Statement

The goal of this study is to use archival data from a participatory action research (PAR) project to construct a local, culturally-informed model of African American children and adolescents' perceptions of stress and their reactions to stress specifically representative of an elementary and a secondary school in New Orleans, Louisiana. Based on data obtained from focus groups, qualitative analyses about the differences in the perceptions of stress and reactions to stress at the two age levels were made.

Qualitative analyses about the role and impact of contexts on stress and stress reactions in the sample also were made. All the work was based on the theoretical framework of two sets of theories: Theories of stress and coping (i.e., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Selye, 1983) and ecological systems theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Spencer, 2006).

Selye (1956) viewed stress as a nonspecific response of the body to noxious stimuli or environmental stressors. His work focused on describing the physiological response pattern known as the general adaptive syndrome (GAS) that was centered on retaining or attaining homeostasis. The premise of the theory was that the GAS was a defensive response that did not depend upon the nature of the stressor. He did not factor in perception as having a role in his initial work but extended his thinking to include both negatively and positively toned (eustress) experiences that could be contributed to and moderated by cognitive factors. However the premise that stress was a physiological phenomenon was not altered and hence it was not possible to explain psychological stress in context of a theory that neglected cognitive-perceptual factors. He did not talk about coping per se, but one of the three components of the GAS is the 'resistance stage' the purpose of which is to resist damage.

Holmes and Rahe (1967) applied the concept of stress to psychological experiences. They treated life changes or life events as the stressor to which a person responds. They viewed the person as a passive recipient of stress and considered it measurable by researcher selected life events that had pre-assigned normative weights. They defined and measured stress as the adjustment or adaptation required by selected major life changes or events. In their later work they incorporated consideration of a

person's interpretation of the life event as a positive or negative experience. Werner (1993) extended the notion that stress was triggered from events. She examined trigger events or stimuli that resulted in stress or significant physical or psychosocial reactions and labeled the trigger event a stressor. She also identified ways to categorize stressors with respect to locus (internal or external), duration, and temporality (acute, time limited; chronic, intermittent; and chronic), forecasting (predictable or unpredictable), tone (positive or negative), and impact (normative or catastrophic). Holmes, Rahe and Werner did not talk about the concepts of reactions to stress or coping.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive theory of stress, appraisal and coping appears to have had the major influence on research on psychological stress and coping over the past three decades. Other dominant theories focus mainly on stress or coping in relation to trauma, abuse, neglect or daily hassles, whereas Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provide a more general framework. They define stress as a particular relationship between the person and the environment that was appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being, and coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive appraisal is the process of categorizing an encounter, and its various facets, with respect to its significance for well-being. It is largely evaluative, focused on meaning or significance and takes place continuously during waking life (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The strength of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory is that it considers cognitive factors and caters for individual differences, that is, the manner in which people appraise

and cope with stressors varies enormously. It factors in the ability for the individual to change their appraisal and thus their response. Thus, it shows that there are alternative methods for managing psychological responses to stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, the direct applicability of the theory to children and adolescents has not been tested and in doing so researchers need to be mindful that children's and adolescents' stressors may not the same as adults' stressors. Many of children's and adolescents' stressors are related to conditions outside their control and hence they are less likely to be able to change the condition, whereas adults have more control over situations and may be more likely to be able to change /control the stressor. Also, cognitive appraisal is an important aspect of the theory and there are significant differences in the cognitive functioning of children, adolescents, and adults (Ryan-Wenger, 1992).

For the current study a stressor is defined as any reference to sources that elicit emotional, physical, or physiological distress for the child or adolescent. The key idea is that the child or adolescent perceives the thought, person, object, etc. as a stressor. If the object is thought to impede education, hinder development, or be a risk factor but the child does not perceive it as a stressor, then it is not considered a stressor (PPWBG, Nastasi& Borja, 2014). *Stress* in this study refers to the subjective negative experiences due to an encounter with a stressor.

Much of the research on child and adolescent coping has proceeded without an explicit definition of coping, and, as a consequence, characteristics of participants' responses that have been included within the concept of coping in one investigation have been excluded from another. The lack of clarity and consensus in conceptualizing coping has had a number of far-reaching effects, including confusion in approaches to

measurement, difficulties in comparing findings across studies, and difficulties in documenting fundamental differences in coping as a function of age, gender, and other individual-differences factors (Compas et al., 2001).

Compas et al. (2001) discuss that a fundamental issue in the conceptualization of coping has been the contrast between responses to stress that involve volition and conscious effort by the individual and responses that are automatized and not under conscious control. They explain two basic positions. A first position posits that coping refers to all responses to stress, regardless of the degree of volition or control involved (e.g., Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997), whereas a second position posits that coping is limited to those responses to stress that involve volition, effort, and conscious control (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For this study the term reaction-stress is used to include any reference to how an individual responds to or copes with stress or problems, and thus can include emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. The term encompasses coping strategies but is meant to be broader category to also capture immediate reactions that may or may not be attempts to cope (PPWBG, Nastasi& Borja, 2014).

Finkelhor, Ormrod and Turner (2009) report developmental differences in exposure to stress; the older the child, the greater the exposure to a wide range of social situations and thus the greater the likelihood of exposure to stress. Nonetheless, social contexts also influence the types of stressors that children face, with very young children more exposed to domestic violence and those in middle childhood more exposed to bullying. Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) report a clear developmental progression in coping as well, with children relying less on behavioral forms of coping and adding more cognitive strategies. They suggest that as with stress, with age, contexts may

become more important for coping. Most studies that look at developmental differences in stress look at it from the point of view of trauma, abuse, and neglect.

Culture can influence the meanings of constructs; hence there arises a need to investigate their validity when applied to distinct populations (Hitchcock et al., 2005; Nastasi et al., 2004). Research by Zadeh et al. (2008) demonstrated that even women from the same ethnic groups who resided in two different cultures differed in their definitions of constructs because of the different contexts they lived in. Addressing cultural factors when measuring psychological constructs has been problematic (Lopez & Guarnaccia, 2000). Ethnographic approaches can generate systematic knowledge of the target culture, and findings can be used to better understand the cultural phenomena and subsequently develop items that adequately measure the phenomena (Nastasi et al., 2004).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological developmental theory is based in his recognition that the environmental events and ecological conditions that surround individuals can have a profound effect on their behavior and development within their settings. His theory appreciates the influences of the various ecological contexts: microsystem, the immediate setting; mesosystem, the connection between two microsystems; exosystem, distal setting in which one may not actively participate but yet has indirect influence; macrosystem, more distal in proximity and reflects societal norms; and chronosystem, the context of time developmentally and/or historically, as applicable. As children move through time, they become better or less well adapted to the various environmental contexts in which their development unfolds. The developmental competencies and capacities of children, the adequacy or inadequacy of the

environmental contexts, the resources or lack thereof, and the interaction of these

dynamic systems together shape the individual and his experiences of stress, support,

coping, and adaptation (Doll & Cummings, 2007).

Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)

deals with the interplay between individual's view of the world and the impact of socio,

cultural, and historical forces that influence the individual's development. As a systems

framework, PVEST posits various aspects of people's lives are mitigated by particular

beliefs about their lives; thus, what alone may seem to be a pitfall can be counterbalanced

by support systems or beliefs (Spencer, 2006).

Within the PVEST framework, the net balance of risk exposure is coupled with

opportunities for support (Spencer, 2006). For example, African American adolescents

who grow up in neighborhoods with challenges associated with poverty also have support

mechanisms that help to buffer potential negative influences. These supports may enable

adolescents to create positive future expectations in spite of the stressors they face on a

consistent basis (Cunningham, Corprew & Becker, 2009). The key component, however,

is an individual's perception of challenges and supports. The PVEST also affords an

examination of normative developmental processes within the confines of environment

and culture (Spencer, 2006).

In response to criticism of past research failing to examine roles that contextual,

racial and cultural factors play in child development, Garcia Coll and colleagues (1996)

developed an integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority

children. Their model integrates ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) with

social stratification theory and emphasizes the importance of racism, prejudice,

discrimination, oppression, and segregation on the development of minority children and families.

According to this model, societal, family, and child factors mutually influence one another and the child's developmental competencies. Societal factors include social position (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, and gender); racism manifested in prejudice, discrimination, and oppression; segregation (e.g., residential, economic, social, and psychological); and promoting and inhibiting environments (e.g., neighborhoods, schools, and health care). Family factors include family structures and roles; family values, beliefs, and goals; racial socialization within the family; and family socioeconomic resources. Child factors include age, gender, temperament, health status, and physical characteristics. At the interface of these three factors is an adaptive culture that involves a social system that differs from the dominant culture. It is through the development of an adaptive culture that minority families manage diversity and the differential access to resources that accompanies their social positions (Garcia Coll et al., 1996).

Psychosocial stress is a significant and pervasive risk factor for psychopathology in childhood and adolescence (Grant, Compas, Thurm, McMahon & Gipson, 2004) and the ways in which children and adolescents respond to and cope with stress are potentially important mediators and moderators of the impact of stress on current and future adjustment and psychopathology. Given the important ways these processes have an impact there has been abundant research, and a fairly large literature on stress in childhood and adolescence is available. Nonetheless, ethnic minority groups, such as African Americans in the United States, are commonly underrepresented in this literature

(Mash & Barkley, 2003). Given that lower socioeconomic status and urban environment—both of which disproportionately affect ethnic minority children and youth—are associated with elevated levels of stressful experiences and psychological symptoms (Jenkins, 1991), it is particularly important for current research to consider low-income and urban populations (Carlson & Grant, 2008).

Research is especially important for youth who have been underrepresented both in coping research and in the development of effective coping interventions. For example, low-income urban youth of color are in particular need for effective coping interventions given their high rates of exposure to severe and chronic stressors such as violent crimes, bad housing, struggling educational systems, and discrimination based on skin color. However, few if any effective coping interventions have been validated for this population (Cardemil, Reivich, Beevers, Seligman & James, 2007) and much remains to be learned about effective coping in the context of urban poverty (Gaylord-Harden, Cunningham, Holmbeck & Grant, 2010).

Not all individuals who face specific or chronic stressors will develop psychopathology. Children's and adolescents' perception of stress and subsequent reactions to stress are essential to study because many of those living in conditions of elevated stress develop adaptive coping responses. Understanding the stressors for this population and their reactions to stress can help in planning intervention programs for equipping children and adolescents to deal effectively with stress or create conditions in the environment to provide them the support and resources they need to succeed.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions specific to a sample of K-2 and 9-10 grade African American students in two charter schools in New Orleans, Louisiana:

1. What is appraised as stress by children and adolescents in an urban African American population?
2. What are the reactions of children and adolescents in an urban African American population to stress?
3. What are the differences between children and adolescents in an urban African American population in their perspectives of stress and reactions to stress?
4. In what ecological contexts do children and adolescents in an urban African American population locate their stressors? Are stress reactions carried out within the same context as the reported stressors?

Literature Review

Given the importance of this topic and its far reaching effects, there is a wealth of literature on stress and coping. This section looks at current literature with regard to stress and reactions to stress in African American children and adolescents, as well as differences in children and adolescents with regard to the two phenomena. Then it goes on to look at the importance and impact of context and finally, the criticality of understanding stress and reactions to stress from the child's and adolescent's point of view.

The sample of this study consisted of mostly African American children and adolescents. Some of the studies cited utilize the term Black; in that case the ethnicity (African, Carribean, American, South American) is not specified, so the term Black will be used as originally used by the respective authors. Also, while this study looks at reactions to stress, it draws from current findings on coping since the definition used in this study is a broad term that includes all current conceptualizations of coping and, there are not any studies that use the term reactions stress as such.

Empirical Understanding of Stress in African American Children and Adolescents

African American children living in inner-city communities face chronic conditions, including economic problems, exposure to community violence, racial stereotyping and discrimination that are rare in the lives of children of other communities (Gaylord-Harden, Gipson, Grant & Mance, 2008). However the extent to which extant findings on stress can be generalized to African American, especially low-income, population is unclear (Gaylord-Harden, Gipson, Grant & Mance, 2008). That is especially true because, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress is a function of

individual perception. This was exemplified by Chandra and Batada's (2006) Shifting the

Lens study; they showed that in contrast to existing literature that emphasizes distal

sources of stress, such as the influence of violence and neighborhood factors on stress

among teens, teens prioritized proximal sources of stress, particularly from school,

friends, and family. This youth-driven, mixed-method approach to study 9th graders

perceptions of stress concluded that both distal and proximal sources of stress are equally

important to understand for African American youth.

Research literature on psychological stress is broadly characterized by two central

themes: (a) wear and tear of stress on mental and physical health; and (b) well-being and

resilience in the face of stress (Folkman, 2011). Carlson and Grant (2008) showed that

conditions that plague the low-income, urban African American community lead to

stressful life experiences that potentially predispose African American boys and girls to

significant risk for psychopathology. They used self-report symptom inventories to

examine relations among gender, psychological symptoms, stress, and coping in low-

income African American urban early adolescents. They found that boys reported more

stress than girls, particularly major events, exposure to violence, and sexual stressors.

Boys in gangs reported greater exposure to sexual stressors than non-gang members. The

authors wrote that the heightened stress reported by boys in this sample foreshadows and

parallels the profound challenges with which African American men within low-income,

urban communities are presented. Pierce (2005) also writes that the path to adulthood for

low-income African American male adolescent is a very difficult one, fraught with

multiple obstacles to psychological health. These males are at disproportionately high

risk for unemployment, incarceration, and premature death due to violence (Pierce, 2005).

Goodman et al. (2005) theorized that race/ethnicity and socio-economic status (SES) reflect social disadvantage, which is the underlying factor in the development of stress-related illness, and examined how social disadvantage, defined in terms of both race/ethnicity and SES, influences adolescents' stress. Their cross-sectional school-based study of 1209 non-Hispanic Black and White 7th – 12th graders revealed that stress was higher among Black students, those from lower SES families, and those with lower perceived SES. Hence, social disadvantage is associated with increased stress, regardless of whether disadvantage is defined in terms of race or SES. This is particularly relevant for the sample of this study since according to 2009 Census data, Blacks constitute the largest ethnic minority group in poverty in American (25.8%), and also have limited upward mobility between generations, thus reflecting an intergenerational trend of poverty (McLoyd, 1998). Finkelstein et al. (2007) also found from their study of 1167 non-Hispanic black and white, junior and senior high school students that relative to adolescents from families with professionally educated parents, adolescents with lower parent education had higher perceived stress.

An examination of the longitudinal association between contextual stressors (i.e., neighborhood disorder, exposure to community violence, discrimination) and health risk behaviors (substance use and aggressive behavior) in a sample of 8th grade African American boys and girls showed that contextual stress was associated with aggressive behavior and substance abuse 2 years later for boys. For girls, contextual stress predicted later substance use, but not aggressive behavior (Copeland-Linder, Lambert, Chen

&Ialongo, 2011). The authors note that a number of previous studies have focused on the impact of one of the aforementioned stressors on health risk behaviors but it is important to acknowledge that African American adolescents do not experience these stressors in isolation but experience a combined effect of these stressors.

Differences in Stressors in Childhood and Adolescence

There is a fairly large literature on stress in children and adolescence but a major focus, especially for children, has been trauma, including child abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and war (Aldwin, 2011). Aldwin reports that both the nature and type of stress change with age in childhood, especially with regard to trauma and life events. Overall, both trauma and life events increase, although the specific type of event and its age trajectory may vary.

A handful of studies have assessed daily stressors, one of which is a study by Hema et al. (2009) that examined daily stressors for diabetic children. Younger children reported problems with siblings and peers, while adolescents reported problems with their self, parents, and school. Neither the children nor adolescents saw diabetes as a daily stressor. Hema et al. (2009) conclude that daily stressors show consistent age-related effects and reflect their life stage. However, as Aldwin (2011) writes, there are relatively few studies and it is not clear whether the amount of daily stress increases in childhood and adolescence. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) also write that stress processes primarily reflect systematic change in social context across the life span, including factors such as SES, although personality characteristics such as neuroticism also contribute to stress exposure and appraisals (Folkman, 2011).

Empirical Understanding of Coping

Despite living in disadvantaged urban communities experiencing social and economic hardships, many children emerge with positive outcomes. It is important to understand what it is that buffers them from the negative outcomes of these hardships. Carlson and Grant (2008) suggest that teaching children and adolescents to use effective coping strategies may prevent them from worsening an already difficult state of affairs. Coping is the process by which people try to manage the perceived discrepancy between the means and resources they appraise in a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two forms of coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping is aimed at reducing the demands of the situation or increasing the resources to deal with it. These strategies encompass the efforts to define the problem, generate alternative solutions, weigh the costs and benefits of various actions, take actions to change what is changeable, and, if necessary, learn new skills. Problem-focused efforts can be directed outward to alter some aspect of the environment or inward to alter some aspect of the self. Efforts directed at the self may include recognizing the existence of personal strengths or resources. Emotion-focused coping is aimed at reducing the emotional response to the stressor, generally through either behavioral or cognitive approaches. These tactics include such efforts as distancing, avoiding, blaming, minimizing, wishful thinking, venting emotions, seeking social support, exercising, and meditating. Unlike problem-focused strategies, emotion-focused strategies do not change the meaning of a situation directly. For example, doing vigorous exercise or meditating may help an individual reappraise the meaning of the situation, but the activity does not directly change the meaning. Emotion-focused coping

is the more common form of coping when events are not changeable (Lazarus &Folkman, 1984).

Aspects of coping that are studied range from strategies generally conceptualized as approach, such as active coping, positive cognitive coping (e.g. positive reappraisal coping, finding positive meaning), problem-solving, and seeking emotional and social support, to strategies considered to be avoidant, such as denial, distraction, blame, behavioral disengagement, and substance use coping. The diversity of measures and labels used in the study of coping make it a challenge to neatly categorize and summarize (Moskowitz, Hult, Bussolari, & Acree, 2009). While avoidant strategies are generally considered maladaptive and approach strategies are generally thought to be adaptive, this may not always be the case. It is possible that in certain situations, or for certain individuals, avoidance coping may be the most effective coping strategy when it prevents an individual from being overwhelmed to the point where he or she is unable to function. Avoidance may also protect people from focusing on stressors that are not amenable to change (Ironson & Kremer, 2011).

Several studies exist that have reported coping findings for low-income urban African American youth that are similar to those found in the broader adolescent population (Gaylord-Harden, Gipson, Mance & Grant, 2008). On the other hand, there is some evidence that African Americans exhibit culturally specific patterns of coping (Scott, 2003). Gender differences in coping that have been reported for predominantly White middle-class samples (Hampel & Petermann, 2006) have also been found for African American low-income urban youth, with boys reporting more frequent use of avoidant and distraction coping and girls utilizing more support-seeking and active

coping strategies than boys (Chandra & Batada,2006). Controlling for socioeconomic status, African American youth use significantly more support seeking and guidance seeking than do White and Latino youth (Rasmussen, Aber, & Bhana, 2004). Studies focused specifically on inner city African American children have identified that they use significantly more types of strategies than do White children (Halstead, Johnson, & Cunningham, 1993). A study by Chiang, Hunter, and Yeh (2004) revealed that African American students identified family and religion to be highly important sources of help and coping for them in dealing with personal, interpersonal, and academic stressors. However, engaging in religious activities was more important than turning to parents and this coping preference, the authors explain, reflects the centrality of spiritualism and religion in Afrocentric values.

Differences in Coping in Childhood and Adolescence

Coping in children most clearly demonstrates a developmental progression. Very young children have only rudimentary problem-solving skills, and emotion regulation largely depends on parental/caregiver efforts. Neurological maturation underlies increases in executive skills, which in turn are reflected in more sophisticated problem-focused coping strategies. Cognitive emotion-focused coping strategies emerge in middle childhood, and adolescents show increasingly independent and sophisticated problem and emotion-focused coping. However, maladaptive coping strategies such as substance abuse and risky sexual behavior also arise in middle childhood and adolescence, with the potential for life-long difficulties (Aldwin, 2011). Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) also report that age differences are apparent as children develop: (a) they rely less on behavioral forms of coping;(b) more cognitive strategies are added; and (c) positive self-

talk and reframing are employed more frequently; and (d) contexts may become more important. The next section explores further about the importance of considering the effect of context and culture on both stress and coping.

The Impact of Contexts

Children and adolescents have ongoing multiple experiences in multiple contexts of their lives that affect their development. Ecological perspective is important to consider when looking at communities and the patterns of coping exhibited by its members because, for example, the chronic nature of stressors in poor urban communities may predict unique patterns of coping. White and Farrell (2006) point out that for African American youth living in communities with high levels of crime and violence, somatic complaints may be more adaptive than sadness or low self-esteem by masking vulnerability. Further, somatic complaints may be more culturally sanctioned expressions of depression and anxiety for ethnic minorities (Gaylord-Harden, Elmore, Campbell, & Wethington, 2011).

Stress and coping are universal experiences faced by individuals regardless of culture, ethnicity, and race, but members of different cultures might consider and respond to stressors differently with respect to coping goals, strategies, and outcomes (Chun, Moos, & Cronkite, 2006). The past two decades witnessed a significant growth in the research and the knowledge base of culture and coping, as well as an increased call by scholars for more culturally and contextually informed stress-coping paradigms (Kuo, 2011).

The environments and relationships in a child's ecology have a significant effect on his or her development in multiple areas. Each influence and context connects with

other parts of the child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The discussion of context is framed around Bronfenbrenner's characterization of multiple levels within the child's ecological system: microsystem, mesosytem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem.

Microsystem. Family and school are the most common direct environments, (microsystems) for young children. Young children rely on caregivers and adults in stressful situations, but with enough support they are often able to carry out effective actions on their own (Bronson, 2000). The severity of the stressful event and the quality of adult participation determine whether children will be able to act effectively in a given situation (Kopp, 2009), hence it is vital to comprehend the environment and people that the child has around him/her since that impacts their stress perception and coping behaviors. Joint problem-solving with caring adults likely represents the kind of coping episodes out of which a repertoire of adaptive strategies, as well as confidence and actual competence, emerge (Kopp, 2009).

Another illustration of the impact of the microsystem on development is found in the research on absent fathers (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Father absence does not only affect the child directly, but also indirectly by impacting the behavior of mothers and other family members. Father absence was found to be most critical during the child's preschool years and had more effect on boys than girls. When a third party helps the parent/guardian in care for the child, this appears to reinforce the parent-child relationship. This third party could be an extended family member, father figure, family friend, or fictive kin. Among African American families, fictive kin are common. Third party individuals have a significant impact on the child and other interacting family members and therefore are a part of each individual's context. Bronfenbrenner (2005, p.

16) states:"The developmental processes taking place within a setting can vary substantially as a function of the personal attributes of significant others present in the setting. Of particular significance are qualities of others that are developmentally instigative for the subject."

Mesosystem. The mesosystemrefers to how the various settings (microsystems) in which the child is involved relate to one another. For example, this may include the connections between home and school. Abramason and Garfield (2006) talk about the balance between protective and vulnerability factors within different contexts surrounding the child that determine negative or positive outcomes for the child. For example, increased risk created by disasters within the family environment can be offset by the presence of protective factors within the family context or within the other microsystems surrounding the child. School-based mental health services represent a protective factor within the school microsystem that can offset the negative developmental outcomes associated with disaster exposure in other settings.

Exosystem. The exosystem refers to the effects of various settings that the individual is not a part of that still indirectly influence the child such as a parent's work place. For example, work and socioeconomic status have direct effects on the domestic environment, affecting the physical condition of the home and the available time for parent-child interaction (Warren, 2005).

*Macrosystem.*The outermost structure of Bronfenbrenner's model is called the macrosystem, which encompasses cultural influences and societal beliefs, which affect the individual. Weems and Overstreet (2008) write about how Hurricane Katrina revealed societal prejudices toward people of color and people living in poverty because instead of

the expected broad, unqualified support for victims of a natural disaster, national polls found evidence of racial bias toward storm victims. Huddy and Feldman (2006) provide evidence that Whites were more likely than Blacks to place some blame on the victims for their plight and less likely to be sympathetic toward those stranded in New Orleans.

Participants of the focus groups in this study either experienced the impact of Hurricane Katrina themselves, or if at the time they were too young then were indirectly effected by the long lasting effects of the storm on their families. Weems and Overstreet (2008) reiterate that prejudice, discrimination, and lack of social support represent factors within the macrosystem that pose a powerful threat to one's sense of physical safety, self-worth, self-efficacy, and social relatedness. The perception of prejudice can lead to limiting support seeking for others in post disaster environment, lead to feelings of low self-worth and have negative implications for youths' ability to cope adaptively with the disaster.

In a similar research Pina et al. (2008) examined whether perceived discrimination impacted posttraumatic stress reactions among youth survivors of Katrina. The authors found that although Black participants perceived more discrimination than White participants, it was only modestly associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms in the study. Of importance, Black participants in the sample also reported higher levels of extra-familial social support. Such findings suggest that future research examine whether potentially negative contextual effects of discrimination might be mitigated by a supportive proximal environment.

Chronosystem. The chronosystem involves temporal changes in ecological system, or within individuals, producing new conditions that affect development. For

example, significant societal events can produce a variety of effects on children. Accessibility to knives and guns has affected many on-campus security procedures; schools installed metal detectors, hired guards and initiated "zero-tolerance" policies whereby aggressive students are expelled for one offense (Santrock,2012).This reflects a transition in socio-historical circumstances and produces a new set of conditions that affects students leading them to have very different experiences compared to those who went to the school when policies (or macrosystem) were different.

Besides changes in the ecological contexts, changes in the child over time are examples of the chronosystem and these affect the direction that development is likely to take. Cognitive and biological changes occur at puberty, for example, that contribute to increased conflict between young adolescents and their parents (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). Physical changes during puberty can affect a child's self-esteem, depending on how his or her developing body compares to that of friends' as well as to the cultural ideal body type (Santrock, 2012).

The effects of environmental change also depend on the age of the child. While divorce hits youngsters of all ages hard, adolescents are less likely than younger children to experience the guilty sense that they were the cause of the breakup (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

Children's and Adolescents Voices

Aldwin (2011) points out that there has been a reliance on parents and caregivers for the reporting of stress in very young children. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualize both stress and coping to be a function of individual perception. Studies

involving stress and coping in young children that rely on adult reporters may not clearly reflect the stress young people experience, or how they respond to those.

Children can serve as reliable reporters of their own feelings and experiences and have been neglected in research; their view must be considered. For too long, the child's perspective has been seen as unreliable, biased and too immature to be considered as valid but it has become increasingly apparent that adults largely underestimate the complexity of a child's world. In contrast to popular opinion, young children have a strong capacity to observe, interpret and react to external influences, issues and confrontations (Sargeant, 2007). Furthermore, research findings challenge claims of the unreliability of child reports.

Band and Weisz (1988) interviewed children, ages 6, 9, and 12 years, asking them to describe coping strategies in response to some common stressors. They advocated that stress should be looked at in everyday life instead of just focusing on the extraordinary, such as illness or handicapping condition, loss of significant caregivers, or serious socioeconomic and psychological risks. They concluded that the children's responses suggested that those as young as 6 years are sufficiently aware of stress and coping in their own lives to report conditions and events that they find stressful, describe their own efforts to cope, and even evaluate the efficacy of those efforts.

A publication by UNICEF Spain (2012) on children's well-being concluded that in assessing children's well-being we cannot put aside the voices and opinions of children themselves and limit our understanding to what we, as adults, think we know about them. Children are good informers if we know how to listen to them.

Sargeant (2007) says that the child's voice is one that requires careful interpretive investigation to reveal its underlying meaning. Fattore, Mason and Watson (2009) argue that attempting to involve children in defining their understanding(s) of well-being requires a different epistemological approach from that employed previously in well-being research – an approach which places children centrally and attempts to understand their standpoints, and this process starts from engaging children and is driven by their experiences and opinions (Fattore, Mason & Watson, 2009). The current study used data from focus groups conducted with children and adolescents to understand stress and coping from their point of view.

Methods

The current study is a secondary analysis of archival data from the larger research project entitled Promoting Psychological Well-Being Globally (PPWBG). The project wassponsored by the International School Psychology Association and principally investigated by Dr. Bonnie Nastasi at Tulane University, with partners from over 12 countries, including sites in the United States. New Orleans was one of the sites for the global project.

The overall project purpose was to develop a cross-cultural understanding of what constitutes psychological well-being and psychologically healthy environments using Participatory Culture Specific Intervention Model (PCSIM) methods consistently across sites. PPWBG serves as a first step in the development of culture-specific school- and community-based programs to facilitate the psychological well-being of children and adolescents.

The conceptual model of the PWBG project includes an emphasis on individual and cultural factors that influence the psychological well-being of the participants (Figure 1; Nastasi, et al., 1998).This model illustrates the link between individual or intrapersonal factors and external or cultural factors that influence the overall psychological well-being of the individual.
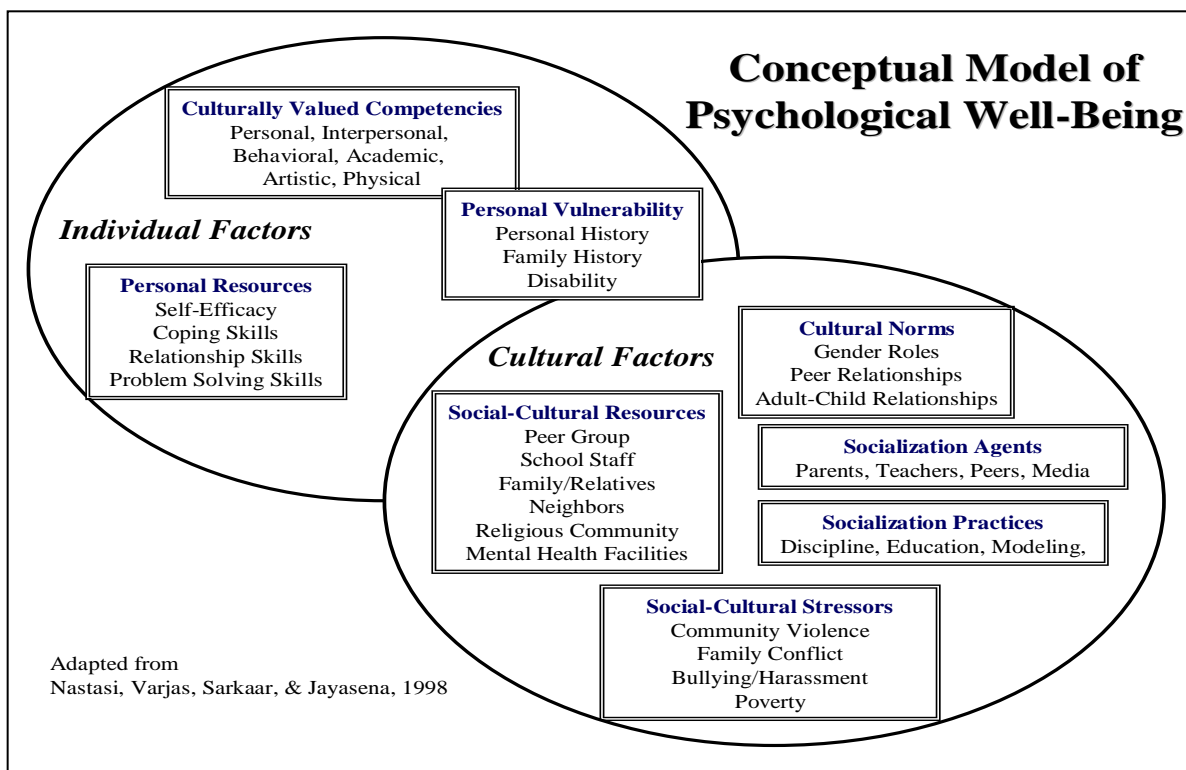
Figure 1.Conceptual Model of Psychological Well-Being. From "Participatory Model of Mental Health Programming: Lessons Learned from Work in a Developing Country", By B.K. Nastasi, K. Varjas, S.Sakar, and A. Jaysena, 1998, *School Psychology Review, 27,* p. 265. Copyright 1998 by the National Association of School Psychologists. Adapted with permission.

Archival data from New Orleans, one of the sites of the global PWBP was used for this study. The New Orleans project sites included an elementary charter school (grades K-2) and a senior charter school (grades 9 – 10). The schools are in an urban Southern United States community with primarily African American student population. Data collection procedures that generated the archival data, and the procedures for the current study, are described in this section.

Using Nastasi et al.'s (2004) PCSIM as the methodology for data collection, the data were collected in the spring of 2010 and fall 2011 by a local research team. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with students in grades K-2 and grades

9 – 10, and their parents and teachers; individual interviews were conducted with administrators. Interviews were guided by the Conceptual Model of Psychological Well-being depicted in Figure 1. This study focuses only on data collected from students.

Both the schools in this study were part of 57 open-access public charter schools under the jurisdiction of the Recovery School District (RSD). The RSD was created in 2003 by State of Louisiana to take over schools that were considered failing. After Hurricane Katrina, in November 2005, a law was passed for the RSD to take over schools that were below average in New Orleans. In 2013-2014 the RSD directly ran about 3 schools and oversaw about 57 charter schools. The RSD is run by a superintendent who is appointed by the state. The State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) oversees the RSD (New Orleans Parent Organizing Network (NOPON), 2013).

In 2013 – 2014, 99% of the elementary school's population was African American and 95.1% students qualified for the free or reduced-price lunch program (New Orleans Parent Organizing Network (NOPON), 2013). At the time of data collection the elementary school housed Kindergarten to third grade students, with plans to add an additional grade each year to become a K-8 school. The school's mission is to prepare scholars for success in college preparatory high schools and selective colleges. The school's mission is to equip scholars to excel in rigorous academic pursuits, to develop strong community-oriented character, and to become positive contributors to society. The school has an extended school year (August through June), extended school day (7.45 am – 3.45 pm), and after school tutoring till 5.00 pm (New Orleans Parent Organizing Network (NOPON), 2013).

In 2013 – 2014, 90.7% of the secondary school's population was African

American, 6.3% Asian, and 1.4% each Caucasian and Latino. The majority (95.1%) of

the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (New Orleans Parent Organizing

Network (NOPON), 2013). The school is from grades 9 – 12 and its mission is to prepare

all scholars for college success and equip them with the passion and tools to begin

innovative and world changing pursuits. The school has an extended school year,

extended school day (8.30 am – 5 pm), and teachers are on call after school for help

(New Orleans Parent Organizing Network (NOPON), 2013).

As of 2010, most teachers in the two schools that are part of New Orleans project

sites are young White Americans who are not from Louisiana. Most teachers are in their

20s or early 30s and many had served in Teach for America. Teach for America is a

national organization that recruits high-performing college graduates and trains them to

reach significant gains with students in disadvantaged school systems. Teach for America

teachers are trained over a five-week intensive institute on lesson planning, execution,

classroom management, and other critical aspects of effective instruction. In 2009,

Louisiana studied the effectiveness of teachers from different teacher-preparation

programs, including Teach for America. Noell and Gansle (2009) found that Teach for

America corps members have a greater impact on student achievement than other

beginning teachers (Noell & Gansle, 2009).However, many report struggles with student

behaviors and global classroom management (Noell & Gansle, 2009).

Although the mission statements of both the elementary and senior charter school

included in this project are heavily focused on college readiness, academic rigor, and

high expectations, they also include an aim for students to develop "strong character"

(New Orleans Parent Organizing Network (NOPON), 2012) Informal, formative partnership building with administrators and teachers revealed that they struggled with the character, mental health, and behavioral aspects of instruction.

Participants

Participants in the students' focus groups included 42 students from grades K – 2 (25 females, 13 males; 38 African American, 1 Latin American and 3 unspecified) and 44students from grades 9-10 (19 Males and 25 females; 26 African American, 1 European American, 17 unspecified). The sample size was determined by criteria for the international PPWBG project and is consistent with expected sample size for achieving saturation in qualitative research (Nastasi, 2008).

Recruitment

Prior to recruitment, both schools signed letters of agreement to participate and all procedures were approved by Tulane University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Letters of informed consent were sent home to all students in the two schools to be delivered to the parents. The letters included information about the researchers and the larger international project. Students were offered incentives (e.g., pizza party) for returning their forms signed, regardless of their parents' decisions about participation. The obtained sample exceeded project targets. Appendix A includes copies of the parent consent forms for child participation.

In addition to informed signed parental consent, verbal assent was obtained from K – 2 students at the beginning of all focus groups and confidentiality and limits to confidentiality were explained. High school students were asked to sign assent forms (included in Appendix A) immediately before participation in focus groups.

A total of 18 groups were conducted, 9 in each of the two schools. The international project procedures required a minimum of 16 elementary students and 16 secondary students for focus groups; the total number at the two sites was 42 for elementary school and 44 for high school.

Data Collection

A total of18 focus groups were conducted by two members of the research team, a facilitator and co-facilitator. Transcribers were present to take notes. Elementary school student focus groups occurred during the school day and, because of time constraints and the developmental attention-span of early childhood students, occurred over a series of about four 30-minute sessions. High school student focus groups occurred after school in a 90-minute session. Focus group participants were provided with snacks.

Focus group size ranged from three to six students. All sessions were audio taped (with informed consent of participants) to insure the accuracy of the transcriptions. The focus group facilitators were graduate students trained in study procedures. The facilitators also had extensive prior experience as educators and administrators working with diverse school populations of students, parents, and staff.

Researcher characteristics and experiences are important as researchers are the primary instrument for data collection in qualitative inquiry (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005; Ponterotto, 2010), and can affect the quality and validity of the data (Burlew, 2003). The PPWBG primary research team included four graduate-level students in a school psychology Ph.D. program under the direction of Drs. Bonnie Nastasi and Michael Cunningham of Tulane University. Initial IRB approval for the New Orleans site was obtained in the Spring of 2009. The primary research team members had prior

professional teaching experience and therefore appreciated the complexities of

conducting research in schools (e.g., scheduling flexibility, leading and facilitating

student and parent group sessions). Two of the primary research team-members were

trained through Teach for America; the other two held certification from alternative or

specialized teacher-training programs (i.e., New York City Teaching Fellows). The

primary research team was supported with technical assistance (e.g., data transcription

and management,) by a variety of assistants including graduate level students,

undergraduate research assistants, prospective graduate students, and the co-principal

investigators. The primary research team participated in mock data collection trials, led

by Drs. Nastasi and Cunningham, prior to data collection to ensure consistency in the

PPWBG protocol.

Consistent with the PWBG procedures of conducting focus groups, the facilitator

asked participants their expectations about students, friends, parents, teachers, and

society. As Appendix B illustrates, student focus groups explored developmentally and

ecologically relevant stressors, social supports, and coping strategies.

Data Transcription

The key to qualitative data collection is using a method that is sensitive enough to

capture participants' authentic phenomenology while minimizing researcher inference

(Creswell, 2009).Transcripts of participants voices needed to reflect participants'

vernacular and as much as possible, exact ideas; thus having consent to audio record was

ideal (Nastasi & Borja, 2014). All data from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim,

using transcriber notes and audio recordings. Data were then entered into electronic text

documents which were password-protected to ensure confidentiality. During data

transcription, all participants were assigned an identification number; thus, coders were blind to the identity of the participants.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation involve a process of coding data, identifying themes within and across codes, and identifying patterns based on variations relevant to factors such as gender, developmental level, and context. The full process was conducted in researcher pairs so that consensus was reached at each stage.

Coding

Coding for the focus group data employed a deductive coding approach (Nastasi, 1999; Ponterotto, 2010).Two broad code categories derived from the study's conceptual model and existing research were used—Stress (STRESS) and Reaction to Stress (RE-STRESS) (see Table 1 for definitions and examples).

All documents were coded independently by two coders, both graduate students who had been trained in the process of qualitative coding and briefed thoroughly in definitions of study constructs. Disagreements between coders were discussed to achieve consensus on all coded segments. Only those statements for which agreement was reached were included in the data set for theme/pattern analysis and interpretation.

Table 1

Codes and Definitions

Code Categories	Definitions
Stress/Stressor *Coding abbreviation:* /STRESS/	Any reference to risk factors or stressors present in the socio-cultural environments of family, school, peer group, community or society that elicit emotional, physical, or physiological distress for the child. The key idea is that *the child* perceives the thought, person, object, etc. as a stressor. If the object is thought to impede education, hinder development, or be a risk factor but the child does not perceive it as a stressor, then it is *not coded* as stressor. *Examples*: In response to the question, What makes you sad**:** "Boys—they do stuff on purpose to make you mad. If you really like them and show them but when we in public they not showing they like you, but when you alone, they show you. They not open. Then they cause problems. Two faced." /STRESS/
Reaction to stress *Coding abbreviation:* /RE-STRESS/	Any reference to how an individual responds to or copes with stress or problems; can include emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Encompasses coping strategies but is meant to be broader category to also capture immediate reactions that may or may not be attempts to cope. In response to the question, What are ways that teenagers express feeling sad: "I just cry it out /RE-STRESS/, or I call a friend /RE-STRESS/, or I'll draw /RE-STRESS/, or listen to music /RE-STRESS/."

Theme analysis

Coders aggregated statements according to code category across respondents (e.g., all K students), identified and clustered statements that represented subcategories or higher-level categories, and summarized themes. Two coders engaged in this step independently and then discussed analysis and reached consensus on themes. This process was conducted separately by grade/gender groups.

Pattern analysis

The themes across all groups were examined for patterns in the data that explained variations in definitions of stress or reactions to stress due to a range of factors: grade, gender, ecological contexts (e.g., family, school, peer group), source of stress, nature of reaction to stress (e.g., emotional, cognitive, behavioral), consequences on well-being or daily functioning, etc. This process was conducted by members of the coding dyads separately and then results discussed to reach consensus.

Results

The research questions explored with samples of K - 2 and 9 – 11 grade African-American students in two charter schools in New Orleans, Louisiana were: (a) What is appraised as stress by this sample? (b) What are the reactions to stress? (c) What are the differences between children and adolescents in their perspectives of stress and reactions to stress? (d) In what ecological contexts do children and adolescents locate their stressors? Are stress reactions carried out within the same context as the reported stressors?

A stressor was defined as any reference to sources that elicit emotional, physical, or physiological distress for the child or adolescent. The key idea was that *the child or adolescent* perceived the thought, person, object, etc. as a stressor. Stress in this study referred to the subjective negative experiences due to an encounter with a stressor. Data analyses revealed four themes related to sources of stress: family, school, peers and community. In addition, tertiary descriptive categories emerged to further define and clarify the secondary themes.

Salient stressors across the K-2 sample

Family. Family refers to any member of the students' immediate or extended families including parents, step-parents, parents' boyfriend/girlfriend, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and fictive kin. Perceived unfair treatment by parents, possible separation from caregivers, parental illness, injury, or death, "whooping" (physical punishment) and threat of violence were identified as sources of stress related to family.

Unfair treatment was described by students when talking about their father as "he always be mean to me; he say bad things, he doesn't let me go outside, he doesn't make me feel happy because he is mean," and "Dad always be yelling at me, always saying I keep minding people's business." A 1ˢᵗ grader described unfair treatment from the mother that "sometimes she slaps me in the face just to be funny with her friends when they visit."A few students mentioned parental illness as a stressor and several brought up death, especially that of a grandparent.

Another stressor identified by students was missing someone in the family that lived far away and being unable to see them. Possible separation from family was brought up as a stressor and not wanting to live in a stranger's house away from "mommy, grandma, and aunty." A student from 1ˢᵗ grade added that "my Mom don't want my Dad to be by me – I want him to live with us but my Momma don't. I want to call my dad to go somewhere – I never go places with my Daddy."

Threat of violence as a stressor emerged when students talking about family mentioned: "When somebody hits you in the face and doesn't say sorry," and "When my mom's old boyfriend said he was going to kill our mom and they might kill us." A kindergartner shared, "When my mom whoops me I be crying."

School. School refers to any mention of the school, teachers, discipline practices at school, academics or any work associated with school. Two interconnected themes associated with school emerged: (a) teachers' behavior in general, and (b) teachers' behavior in relation to implementation of the behavior management technique at the school, referred to as the clip chart. Regarding the first, a student in 2ⁿᵈ grade said, "She takes her anger out on us; she teaches us about letting out our anger without being mean

but she looks at us mean when she gets angry and sends us to the end of the line."
Regarding the second theme students said they felt angry at the teacher because "she moves people's clips down when they don't know why the clip got moved down," and "she is mean and I feel mad like when she yells at us to move our clip down for tying our shoes when standing in line."

The clip chart consists of a chart that has been divided into levels. All the children start the day at the same level. During the course of the day the children move their clothespins up or down the chart based on the behavior choices they make. Good choices lead to moving their clothespin up a level at a time whereas inappropriate behavior would cause them to move down a level.

Peers. Peers refer to any other children (i.e. classmates, friends, relationships) with whom students interacted that were not members of their family. In particular, themes that were identified as sources of stress related to peers included physical aggression, social exclusion, fights with friends, and ending of friendships.

Children spoke about it being stressful if somebody hit them, punched them in the arm, pushed them down, threw a rock at them, pushed them out of their chair, and pushed them on the playground or off the slide. Social exclusion was a stressor talked about by many participants. A student in the 1st grade mentioned first day of school being stressful because they anticipated that they would have no friend to play with, whereas a 2nd grader simply said it was stressful when "nobody is your friend and nobody plays with you." Ending of a friendship was described by a kindergartner as a stressor in these words, "When they say they don't like you, or they say they not your friend anymore, when they make you sad they break your heart like that."

*Community .*Community refers to people or situations outside of the home and school, such as neighbors, public spaces, or strangers on the street. Bad neighbors emerged as a stressful aspect of community for violating boundaries of personal space on more than one occasion. A student in kindergarten said, "I don't like when my neighbors come over and not knock on my door. They just bust the door open." Several students in the 2nd grade mentioned, "Mean and cursing neighbors."

Salient stressors across the 9 – 10 grade sample

Family. Students in this group mostly spoke about parents being a source of stress, along with some mention of cousins. Stressors related to parents were bad relationship with parents, restrictions perceived to be unfair, not being there for the children, hitting/spanking, sharing too much information with others about child, illness and death, unfair punishments, and humiliation/putting the children down.

Students said it was stressful "having a bad relationship with parents," and "parents make you feel so pissed off." One female student talked about parents not being there in these words, "…me and my daddy, not daddy, I call him my 'sperm donor', he was never there for me." Students also said it was stressful when parents did not listen to them or "support in whatever you wanna do, like your goals and stuff." A girl added that "a bad parent is like when they try to put you down. My dad will tell me sometimes that I'm a follower because I got a tattoo. You're not supposed to really be saying that you know…."

Examples of being hit by parents are wholly captured in the following two statements. A boy said what was stressful was, "My fear of my mom. You know how

normally you get hit with either a belt or a switch? She don't do that, she gets an umbrella or some tools to whack me! I'm kind of used to it now, but I used to get in trouble a lot." A girl said, "When your mom is drunk every day and every time you come home from school she hits you so you get tired of it and so she's stressing you out."

Punishment from parents was a stressor. Some punishments were a consequence of certain behaviors, especially a bad grade or not doing a chore. Having their cell phones and computers taken away were the most common punishment listed. Other times the adolescents felt that the parents punished them "for things that you really didn't do, or humiliates you on purpose to make you feel bad or bring up bad things that aren't even your fault."Some students were perplexed by their parents' anger, as explained by a boy about his mother, "When she's angry and upset she goes on about things when I don't even understand why she's angry and I'm sitting there trying to figure it out. I don't get her sometimes when she gets angry."

Unfair restrictions by parents were another theme that came up. Adolescents felt stressed when they saw their friends were allowed to do things their parents did not allow them, like frequently attending parties at friends' places. Some students felt parents even had a different set of rules for them and their siblings. Sharing too much information about them, or telling everyone what they did was vehemently agreed by the girls' group to be a stressor.

Death of a loved one, or pets, was a theme students identified. A boy said a stressor to him was "When you think about losing one of your parents," or "If a loved one died I don't know what I would do," or "When somebody gets killed." These statements

were mirrored in the girls' focus groups, as was the fear of their own death, especially a painful death or dying during sleep.

Several girls said that seeing their mother distressed was a stressor for them. One explained that "When she's stressed out then that makes me stressed out and I feel it too."

Cousins were mentioned in the context of feeling betrayed by them. For example, a female student shared that her cousin heard her break up with her boyfriend on the phone and the very next day the cousin started seeing him. Boys talked about feeling stressed when "somebody talks about you" but did not specify the relationship.

School. The themes related to school dealt with teachers, and grades, the school rules and discipline practices, and being judged or stereotyped. Students spoke vehemently about the school's disciplinary system being a stressor. The girls' group said that "our disciplinary system is bad because I feel we don't need to be punished, makes us crazy, it's like being in a penitentiary or something like that, like we just sit there looking at those walls and freezing and nothing's happening but they're making us more angry and more rowdy. I told them let's find alternatives, something that actually teaches us a lesson."

One of the boys shared "I have made many occasions of what I don't like about this school: the demerits, the detention, it's all just...they be quick to do it. The demerit thing, that's not helping nobody learn, 'cause as soon as they give one, somebody's ready to go home. You'd rather somebody just be relaxed and chill, then give somebody the demerit probably for no reason and just go off."

Students felt angered at the school by what they perceived were too many restrictions and "too much authority, like when they try to control you rather than limit you…act like robots we are just supposed to follow what they say." A boy explained how "in my last school too they had us walking in a certain area, but they just asked us, they didn't have black tape there so we had more freedom. They make people not want to come here."

Other restrictions students talked about included "getting out at 5pm", "school day is too long," "not having any recess", " all the uniforms," "too many rules," "all the homework they be giving us." A girl shared how it stressed her when at her last school they used a paddle if a student failed a spelling test.

Students identified a teacher-related stressor as their disrespect toward students. A girl said, "These teachers they don't respect us so why should we respect them, just because they are authority figures?" A boy reported about his teacher, "He was like f y'all was acting like a bunch of heathens. He ain't gonna say f me to me so I slapped him." Students also expressed distress about teachers' use of sarcasm, for example, their saying "we don't understand" and her replying "yes you do." Many reported the teacher made them feel stupid by such an attitude. Another stressor was when "a teacher starts yelling at you, when you're still trying to figure out what you did wrong, and you're in front of the whole class that's kind of embarrassing." Students also shared that when they struggled with a problem, and ran out of time, most teachers just moved on and forgot about their problem. Also, they found it frustrating when they asked the teacher for help and she told them to get help from their partner; students felt that teachers should be able to explain things herself.

Another stressor at school was sitting next to a student who behaved inappropriately. The students said if other students poked them, talked loudly while they were trying to work, and also got other students to laugh at their antics, it was disturbing for them and affected their grades. They said it was difficult to concentrate, and better to sit alone to focus better.

A final school-related stressor had to do with feeling judged or stereotyped especially when one was new in school. Students said others judged you based on how you looked, or dressed, and said they didn't like you without getting to know you. If someone's clothes were wrinkly they assume they are poor, which may not be the case. Students also said in elementary school some students didn't want to hang out with others because they were dark, but outgrew such things in high school. However in high school others spread rumors about something you did, making others not want to hang out with you and hating you.

Peers. Students in the secondary school tended to focus more on romantic relationships as a source of peer stress. Both boys and girls agreed that breaking up with a boyfriend/girlfriend was a stressor. Boys mentioned feelings of jealousy when seeing their girlfriend "hugging on some dude." They shared that even if the hug was platonic it made them "confused and wonder whether or not she was cheating on them." Girls shared feelings of being really hurt and mad when they discovered through other peers that their boyfriend was involved with another girl as well. They also said it was a stressor "when someone gets you pregnant and everyone just abandons you and no one wants anything to do with you."

Peer pressure was a theme that was brought up in these words: "like when everyone is doing something and they want you to do something and you feel like you have to even though you don't want to. There's all kinds of ways that that happens." Students shared how the actions or words of others served as a stressor by making them feel bad. For example students said, "I hate when people rip me. Like when someone talk about me in a bad way, I be feeling bad and embarrassed. So then I just talk back to them," "when someone puts you down and you feel that there is nothing left to live for," "feeling abandoned," and "The main thing that make you feel sad is when you know you ain't poo but everybody tell you you poo." A boy described a bad friend being a stressor by trashing the house when invited over, being disrespectful to the mother and "if there's a group of dudes, he's just gonna run like a little girl, he won't have your back."

Fights with friends was a theme that emerged. One girl described a situation where she and her friend had a fight "and became enemies." She said both of them felt hurt and stressed due to tension between them and finally their advisor sat them both down and helped them talk through whatever had happened and reconcile with each other.

Students shared that being 16 years old was an awkward transition and "not all what's it made up to be." They felt stressed by the seemingly conflicting expectations from them as a girl described, "It's like when you're acting a certain way they'll say stop acting childish you're too old for that, and when you're acting mature they're like you're too young to be like that. So it's just really weird to be sixteen."

Community. Students described as a stressor the presence of weapons in the neighborhood, whether they had experiences related to them directly or indirectly. They

talked about being scared when they heard gunshots, or having friends in the neighborhood who died because they were "playing with a gun and got shot."A girl shared that "things that make me scared are like weapons. When I see a gun, I run. I don't care if you won't shoot me or you would shoot me." Another girl shared her experience of being scared when a boy in the projects she lived in brought a gun in the hallway. In reference to guns a boy said "This is New Orleans, I'm used to hearing gun shots all the time…the only time you actually get scared is when it's pointed at you." Other boys shared that "when you see a weapon, you get scared, cos you don't know what's about to happen," and that weapons scared him because "I don't want to die."

Another stressor was having someone break into their home. Murderers and rapists were listed as stressors but no further elaborations were provided.

Reactions to Stress

For this study the term reaction-stress was used to include any reference to how an individual responds to or copes with stress or problems, and thus could include emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. The term encompassed coping strategies but was meant to be a broader category to also capture immediate reactions that may or may not be attempts to cope. Secondary themes that emerged as reactions to stressors identified by the focus groups included actions (behavioral), feelings (emotional) and thoughts (cognitive). Some of these reactions to stress individuals did on their own while others were interpersonal.

Salient Reactions to Stress across the K-2 sample

Actions. Actions refer to any response to stress that included effects on behavior. Different actions that emerged included help seeking, social withdrawal, hiding or avoidance, physical and verbal aggression, disobedience towards adults, self-soothing, distraction activities, self-harm, and redemptive behaviors.

Students explained one reaction to stress is to reach out to others and ask for assistance. At home they said they ran to their parents when they were scared, or needed help, and if parents were busy they turned to siblings. Other family members they turned to for help included "grandfather and mawmaw." Several students reported hugging the pet dog for support when stressed. Students said, "You can tell somebody about your feelings to make you feel better," and besides family they mentioned the school staff: "tell the teacher," and "tell the principal."

Play was a common method used to restore positive feelings during stressful moments. A kindergartener said, "If you're feeling sad you can ask a teacher if you can play with her and she can say yes," while another kindergartener said, "ask someone if they can play with you."

Many students mentioned physical aggression as a reaction to stress. A student in the 2nd grade said, "When I get real mad I push people," while others talked about punching a sibling in the stomach, hitting a cousin and their mom on the face, and hitting and kicking their peers. Some students in the 2nd grade mentioned relational aggression, for example, "I would hurt them back by calling them names or ignoring them." Some students talked about self-harm, like a 1st grader reported that "I hit myself with my doll

and I keep doing it and I fell down on the floor and I start hitting myself with my hand." Many students expressed physical outbursts against inanimate objects as a stress reaction, like throwing everything on the floor, pushing their table or chair away and making really loud noises in the process.

In reaction to the stressor getting their clip moved down many students mentioned causing classroom disturbance like, "I would wreck up, tear up the whole class, make it messy," "jump on desks, knock chairs down, I would feel dangerous," and "I'd yell shut up." Only one student in the 2nd grade talked about working to get clip moved back up by "sitting in STAR," and answering more questions.

Disobedience to adults' directions was another reaction stress. A student in kindergarten shared that in response to her mother not letting her call her father, she herself stormed to her room and dialed his number anyway. At school a 2nd grader reported kicking the teachers' things to the floor and refusing to pick them up or apologizing.

Students mentioned social withdrawal and hiding as a reaction to stress. They said you tell everyone to "leave you alone." Many students said "I go to my room and not come out," or "I lay under the covers," and "I use a pillow to cover my face." In situations that didn't afford the opportunity to withdraw, a student said "I put my arms and head inside my shirt."

Students talked about self-soothing. They said they can feel better by "having a smile on your face." Some students said "when you take a nap that makes you feel happy." The students also spoke of specific calming techniques like deep breathing and

positive thinking. For example, "They can calm their selves down by thinking calm thoughts, like thinking about a time you went to the park. And you could take three deep breaths, and you can count from five to zero." Some students spoke of distractions like playing Wii or putting on music to feel better when scared.

Feelings. The category, feelings, was defined as any reference to emotions including labels or an explanation for how feelings are physiologically/physically expressed. Any *behavioral* manifestations of feelings were grouped together under the theme of *action,* for example kicking their things in anger. Common feelings that the students experienced include sadness, fear, anger and physical responses associated with these feelings.

A few students mentioned showing angry or sad facial expressions in response to stress. Some mentioned sleeplessness, accelerated heartbeat and shivering. Crying was the major response to stress whether it was due to "being whooped" by parents or friends telling them their "artwork was not beautiful."

Salient Reactions to Stress across the 9 – 10 grade sample

Feelings and Thoughts. Adolescents described a rich range of thoughts and feelings experienced in response to stressors. Amongst others they spoke of getting mad, feeling helpless, hurt, unhappy, tired, unable to concentrate, feeling hopeless and useless, being nervous, experiencing memory loss, being embarrassed, guilty, experiencing remorse, hatred, jealousy and humiliation.

Students explained that faced with any stressor, and especially if it was intense they "*zone out*, they don't pay attention to anything that is happening, they're just

thinking about whatever they need to be thinking about." When stressed students reported they were *unable to concentrate* on school work. Memory loss of a stressful time was explained by a boy in these words, "I feel down a lot…depressed, I feel lonely. I had a horrible past life, but I don't really have memories of that time, I don't remember what things were like." Another boy agreed that "I don't remember things that I don't want to remember." Some stressors made the students feel depressed and tired, "you're tired of something and just don't want to take it anymore." Crying to relieve the stress was mentioned by most focus groups, both boys and girls. Many talked about being preoccupied with the stressor and having a lot of thoughts about the stressor, for example in thinking about a relationship thinking "why did this happen."

Sometimes students felt helpless or like they were stuck. For example they felt helpless when their teachers did not respect them, or *stuck* with having to give in to peer pressure otherwise peers started rumors about them.

Jealousy and hatred were common stress reactions. Students felt jealous of other peers' families, or when others had things and kept showing off and hated "another dude who hugged his girlfriend." They felt embarrassed if they fell down in front of others or others "ripped them," or when teacher started yelling at them in class in front of everyone and they didn't even know what they did wrong. They spoke of experiencing humiliation when parents kept bringing up their mistakes from the past, or issues that weren't really even their fault. The students experience guilt and remorse if their actions were the cause of someone else getting hurt, for example if their actions were responsible for someone breaking up. Being scared was a commonly reported emotion - scared of weapons, unsafe neighborhood and death.

Some girls said they "got used to" the stressor, citing how they realized people would always continue to perceive and talk about them, so they just accepted that, didn't think about it and didn't pay attention. In contrast, many spoke of feeling self-conscious and nervous when people stared and knew they were being stereotyped based on how they dressed. Many mentioned being hurt when others "were mean to them." In reaction they also sometimes started putting themselves down and feeling hopeless and had thoughts of harming themselves, even suicide. However they said then they thought about the consequences of their actions, and all the people who would be affected by their suicide and realized it was not a good idea. Students also included feeling mad and furious at other people. They needed a few minute of "calming down" or "chilling their anger" period where they could go outside, or to the back of the class.

Common physiological responses to stress included "turning red in the face" in anger, "feel adrenalized," and "shake". Anxiety was revealed by being fidgety, "getting butterflies in the stomach," and sadness manifested in feeling tired all the time. They also mentioned pouting, and "hair falling out."

Some students said they tended to think about negative aspects or prospects of a future stressor, for example believing they'll fail the test or get a bad grade. That made *them lose motivation*. Most students instead talked about focusing on the positive aspect of a stressful situation, like "take it as a compliment if people hate on you, it makes me feel happy," or reminding oneself that the mother loves them when she pushed them too hard to work or do better in school.

Actions. Adolescents spoke of a wide array of actions in response to stress. The response to school disciplinary practices was reported by students to make them "more

rowdy." Students also shared that the numerous rules and restrictions "make people not want to come here." Some students shared that when teachers gave them demerits it made them behave worse, for example, "If she give me a demerit for no reason I just start talking, I'm gonna earn it, they're not gonna give it for no reason" and "I just start blurting out kookoo stuff." The girls' group was very proactive and said that not only should we try and come up with alternates, they had talked to the principal and were working on a presentation to provide alternates. Some students said they took measures in advance to ensure they didn't get the punishment, like a student said in reference to use of a paddle at her last school for failing tests, "I used to study really hard so I didn't get that." Boys said, "School stress will probably make people drop out sometimes, they don't wanna have to deal with it all the time, or they'll just be less involved in everything at school."

Many students talked about seeking help of others to reach solutions. For example with teacher related stressors a girl said, "Go home and tell your mom what happened and get her to call the teacher and talk about it." Other students agreed that parents can handle the situation better, "because you're mad and just talking but your parents are calm." Students also spoke of getting help from the school social worker to help resolve conflict with a peer, having the social worker talk them both through their differences and help become friends again. In response to being scared students said they ran to any adult, and held their hand, or hugged their sister.

Talking to others for support was a salient theme that emerged as a reaction to stress. Girls said they talked to their parents, "unless they're the ones that aggravated me." Many girls shared that they talked to their mother, sister or best friend, or "people

that make me laugh". They spoke of friends and sisters being able to make them remember the good times, make light of the situation, be silly and make them laugh. They shared the need to be careful who they shared things with, for example while one student brought up they could talk to the advisors they had at school others agreed that they did not trust them because they "run their mouth too much." Many said they talked to others who couldn't respond, for example "I talk to my baby cousin 'cause the baby don't know what I'm talking about," and "I talk to my dog, a dog won't talk back." They also spoke of venting without caring who's around to hear, "Start venting about everything frustrating them right now, they don't care about who hears or what you said, you just vent." They also brought up venting on Facebook, but being careful about their words and how much information they shared. Some girls spoke of talking to themselves and said, "when you talk to yourself you know what answers you want to hear."

Boys said they when stressed they shared everything with their girlfriend, or best friend. Some spoke of talking to their auntie, or "their old teacher." Boys used talking as a stress reaction when scared, for example they said "if you hear gun shots you call the police," or if they were walking alone in the neighborhood at night they would call someone, "to get their mind off the scariness, and have a witness if something happened." Boys said that intimacy with their romantic partner was sure to turn their frown into a smile.

Another theme related to talking was confrontation. While talking was to look for support, share thoughts and feelings or ask help, confrontation referred to talking to the person causing the stress to tell them to stop, go away, or find a solution together. Girls said they questioned why someone behaved the way they did to understand their actions,

like lying or betraying them. With friends who betrayed their trust however, by talking behind their back or stealing her boyfriend, they said they'd end the friendship. When a teacher's words or attitudes were the stressor girls said they talked back to them. "Don't comment if you don't want a comment back," said one student. They also said if they were embarrassed by someone teasing them they talked back to them. They also talked about confronting their mothers and telling them to stop certain behaviors, like over sharing information about them with everyone. Sometimes it helped to "write it out and send it to" to the person who made them sad or hurt. A boy said that, "I stand up to my Momma and look up and we gonna talk," while another said he was scared of nobody but his momma and grandpa so could not confront them about stressful behaviors. At school with peers they said you can tell them "leave me alone, or after school we can handle this like men, it's up to you." They shared the same about peers trying to intimidate them that we'd not say anything at the time in school but "after school you nail the guy." If in the unlikely event they were really scared of the students they'd tell the teacher. With a teacher a boy said, "I tell them nothing."

Another salient stress reaction that emerged was aggression. This was manifested in many forms, like physical aggression against other people or inanimate objects, verbal aggression or relational aggression. Both boys and girls said they "stomped their feet," "slammed the door hard," "punched and kicked things," and broke "anything they could afford to destroy." They also spoke of cursing others, sometimes the person who triggered the stressor, and other times they "took it out on somebody who had nothing to do with the stressor." Students used terms like "clicking them," or "blow on them" to indicate that they their facial expressions showed irritation and they said things like "get

out of my face" when angry. The targets for such reactions were teachers, peers, siblings, parents and grandparents and students said when "you are in the heat of the moment you just go off, you don't care about the consequences or punishment or what your momma gonna think." Girls talked about spreading rumors about a person who betrayed them, and putting someone else down to feel better about themselves.

Another theme that emerged was self-harm, suicide and substance abuse. A girl said, "I say do drugs to mentally escape the place." Students shared that among adolescents, "cutting is becoming a big problem." Students also reported that low self-esteem, feelings of uselessness and jealously lead some students to commit suicide.

Many students talked about engaging in solitary activities to either calm themselves down or as distractions from the stressor. Girls said they read a book, did some artwork, or wrote in their diary to calm down while boys said they went for a walk when angry. Most groups mentioned listening to music or watching television as a stress reaction. A student mentioned doing the Rubik's cube. Boys said hyper vigilance was a stress reaction especially when scared, for example constantly looking around and checking to make sure no one is after you. Boys and girls both said deep breathing and mediation techniques were a reaction they tried to use. Girls shared that if they were depressed they slept all day. Sometimes in reaction to school stress, too much class work, homework, assignments and tests, students said they just refused to do it. It felt like too much so they just "sit there and don't do anything."

Seeking isolation was a popular stress reaction, both physically and also in terms of not wanting to talk to anyone. At home they spoke of retreating to their bedroom, and at other times "they asked to be left alone and not be bothered." This was in response to

being angry, sad or upset. Students said you could tell another peer was stressed by any change in behavior. For example they'd be less talkative than usual, completely quiet, or not laugh at jokes.

Similarities and Differences between K – 2 grade and 9- 10 grade Students in their Perspectives of Stress

Adolescents talked about a significantly greater number of stressors than the younger children; however for both age groups the sources of stress were located in the same systems namely family, peers, school, and the community. Every stressor mentioned by the children overlapped and emerged in the adolescent's groups as well, with slight variations and nuances in the way it presented as a stressor due to the different developmental levels the groups were at. For example social exclusion was a salient stressor at all age levels. The younger children referred to it as, "nobody is your friend and nobody wants to play with you," while the adolescents referred to it when talking about platonic relations with peers feeling "stressed at being alone and feeling abandoned." Although peers presented stress for children, the primary stressors for children came from the adults in their life, and among them most saliently the parents and teachers. For adolescents each group was stressful, but there were more peer related stressors and they talked about peers at length indicating that this group was focal in the lives of the adolescents.

For children stress was usually specific to the context that they were in at present and was limited to the negative behavior meted out by others, with the exception of missing someone or fear of being separated from family. Adolescents showed higher thinking processes and in addition to context specific and behavior based interpersonal

stressors they were affected by less tangible concepts as well. For example, they spoke of the contradictory and confusing expectations and rules that came with their being 16 years old and being considered neither an adult nor a child, or concerns about uncertainties in future, like would a romantic relationship last, or would they succeed academically. Children's stressors were limited to the situation, for example, fights with friends meant being pushed off the slide or their not sharing things. Those were resolved within the contexts. For adolescents the impact of stressors sometimes transcended into other domains, for example a fight making friends upset, leading to inability to concentrate and affecting their grades.

As far as family related stressors were concerned, children and adolescents both talked about unfair restrictions, being spanked, punishment, and the illness or death of loved ones. In addition to those, adolescents talked about parents not being there for them, sharing too much information with others about them, not being supportive of their dreams, or putting them down. Some also felt stressed in experiencing empathy when they saw their mother stressed or crying.

At school, the disciplinary practices and teachers' negative behaviors were major stressors for all age groups. For adolescents in addition to these the long school hours, too much homework, being stereotyped and having rumors spread about them and peers distracting them from work were stressors.

With peers, the themes that overlapped across all age groups were limited to physical aggression, fights with friends, social exclusion and ending of friendships. Adolescents tended to focus on romantic relationships as a source of peer stress.

Additionally they spoke of disrespectful friends, and the concepts of loyalty or betrayal that the younger children did not.

Bad neighbors were the only common community based stressor between all age groups. Only adolescents spoke of unsafe neighborhoods, presence of weapons in the neighborhood, people dying from gunshots, having houses broken into or the presence of murderers and rapists.

Similarities and Differences between K – 2 grade and 9- 10 grade Students in their Reactions to Stress

Reactions to stress showed a clear developmental progression. Many of the reactions adolescents reported were a more refined and mature version of reactions that children reported. This section discusses in detail the reactions that were the same, reactions in adolescents that were a more evolved version of those that the younger ones used and then reactions that were only reported by the adolescents and not the children.

Children reported primarily action based stress reactions, some physiological responses, very few emotions/feelings and no cognitions or thought processes in response to stress. Adolescents also reported action based stress reactions but their repertoire was much broader than that of children; they reported extensive emotion/feeling based reactions and then many incidences of thoughts or cognitive restructuring in response to stress.

Children's stress reactions that were action based included aggression, self-harm, social withdrawal or avoidance, disobedience to adults, meditation and distraction activities. Adolescents reported the same, but as in the case of stressors, the actual

behaviors while categorized under the same theme looked different. For example in young children self-harm was manifested as, "I hit myself with my doll and I keep doing it and I fell down on the floor and I start hitting myself with my hand," whereas adolescents reported it in these words, "Some students do harm to themselves, like slicing their arms and stuff. Yeah, some students may even choose to use cutting as a measure." The extent of self-harm in adolescents included suicide. They also referred to other self-harming behaviors, such as resorting to drugs as an escape from stressors.

All groups talked about turning to others for help. Children turned to parents and teachers. Adolescents relied more on their peers and parents, and very wary of trusting their teachers or advisors because they said they, "ran their mouth too much." Also, adolescents used Facebook to vent, something the children did not mention presumably because they are too young to have access to that avenue. Adolescents also tried to manage stress on their own even before turning to peers or parents. Aggression in the case of children was limited to verbal and physical forms, but adolescents also included relational aggression and cited examples of "spreading rumors about somebody who betrayed your trust." Children talked about blatant disobedience of adults' instructions; adolescents reported, "refusal to do work," but that stemmed more from being overwhelmed by academic work and unable to take it anymore rather than disobedience. Adolescents were able to take preventive steps to avoid a stressor, for example, studying hard to avoid failing a test and being paddled. Redemptive behaviors were mentioned only by children, that is, following classroom rules better to have "their clip moved back up." Even children as young as those in first grade talked about using meditation techniques, deep breathing, and thinking of happy times. These reactions carried on into

the later ages. Children talked about taking a nap to help themselves feel better, whereas adolescents talked about sleeping all day as a reaction to depression. Both age groups talked about social withdrawal, or removing themselves from the situation, but in addition to that children appeared to take comfort in physically hiding. For example one student talked about not only going to the bedroom, but also lying underneath the covers or if in class then tucking the head and arms inside their shirt.

Basic physiological responses like pouting, turning red, palpitation, shivering and crying reported by children were also reported by adolescents. However as far as feelings were concerned children only mentioned feeling sad, afraid and angry. Adolescents in addition to these talked about feeling helpless, stuck, depressed, jealous, hate, embarrassed, humiliated, guilty, remorseful, self-conscious, nervous and hurt. They also talked about memory loss, "zoning out", difficulty concentration and putting oneself down.

The most outstanding difference that stood out in the reactions to stress of the two age groups was the more developed cognitive processes of older students compared to the younger ones who did not mention thoughts at all. Older students were able to restructure their thoughts to tone down the stressfulness of a situation or to look at it in another light. For example, instead of being stressed about being hated on they took it as a compliment. While they shared that in the heat of the moment they did not care about the consequences, they did think a lot before making serious decisions, like refraining from suicide as it would be devastating for those they loved.

Location of Stressors in the Ecological Context

The majority of the stressors reported by students across all age groups and focus groups were located in the microsystem. The individual him/herself is at the centre of the microsystem, and it represents direct interaction of the individual with others in the immediate settings. In this study, units included in the microsystem were the family (parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents) and school (teachers and peers). It is not surprising that most of the stressors originated from the microsystem since a vast majority of stressors were interpersonal and hence by the very nature indicate interaction with those in their immediate settings. As already discussed in the sections above, stressors arose due to other's negative behaviors, empathy for loved ones' troubles and death or illness of loved ones. Adolescents also spoke of the fear of their own death, especially it being painful.

The mesosystem refers to how the various settings (microsystems) in which the individual is involved relate to one another. Adolescents mentioned the interaction of parents and teachers as a stressor in these words, "Whenever you see your parents at school, you know something is up and you should be scared," and "If your mom just happens to be at the school, and she's in the hallway talking to a few teachers, you're alright. But if she walks into the classroom…..that's trouble." Interaction of peers with parents was also a stressor in the case that the friend "be disrespectful to my mother."

The exosystem refers to the effects of various settings that the individual is not a part of that still indirectly influence the individual. Participants of this study spoke of bad neighbors as a stressor that was located in the exosystem. In addition they spoke of unsafe neighborhoods, presence of weapons, murderers and rapists, and people breaking

into someone's house all of which are a part of the exosystem. Participants in one of the focus groups in reference to the disciplinary practices of the school said, "I think the school board is a bad citizen. They're only doing restoring of justice for the people who are the worst." The school board is a part of the exosystem. A lot of other policies that originated from the school board were mentioned such as long school hours, having to walk in areas designated by black tape, and the disciplinary system of giving out demerit. However, with both, weapons in neighborhoods and school board's policies students spoke of them such that they placed themselves at the centre of those experiences rather than looking at them as something separate from them, completely removed, in another system. The way they talked about them and their direct impact, it appeared that the stressors were a part of the microsystem. Enough data was not available to identify whether students recognized, for example, that teachers were just following school policies by implementing the discipline practices at the school rather than acting on their own method of disciplining. So available data was not enough to make conclusions about whether in the eyes of the participants these stressors were a part of the microsystem or exosystem.

The outermost structure of Bronfenbrenner's model is called the macrosystem, which encompasses cultural influences and societal beliefs, which affect the individual. A reference made by a student that indicated a macrosystem influence was feeling frustrated by her mother not allowing her to wear black nail polish because "I was brought up with church so wearing anything black or gothic is devilish." Another student also referred to being scared of somebody "in the street wearing all black."

The chronosystem involves temporal changes in ecological system, or within individuals, producing new conditions that affect development. The most obvious reference to this was in the confusion that came with being 16 years old. Students felt disappointed that "it isn't all that it's made out to be," and it was confusing to be told to stop acting "so childish," or "too mature" for that age.

Ecological Contexts in Which Stress Reactions Are Carried Out

All stress reactions that were reported occurred within the microsystem. The only exception of getting help from outside the immediate settings was calling the police when a "group of boys jumped me," and when they "heard gunshots." Stress reactions occurred within the microsystem but not necessarily within the setting the stress occurred in. Students reported many possible stress reactions exhibited in response to the same stressor, and those either involved relying on their own self, confronting the stressor directly, turning to others for help, or avoidance. The reaction depended on the individual, nature of the stressor, and the context.

Student said that in response to any stress they talked to the parents, "unless they're the ones who aggravated me." When parents were a source of stress students (a) told them to stop the offending behavior, (b) reminded their own selves that the parents were behaving that way because they loved them, (c) retreated to their bedroom (d) disobeyed whatever instruction they disagreed over, (e) ran to grandmother's house, or (f) talked to siblings or peers.

Stressors at school that had to do academics or teachers behaviors resulted in students (a) wanting to run home or talk to parents about it, (b) becoming rowdy and

disruptive, (c) zoning out, lose concentration, not doing their work, (d) using meditation techniques to calm themselves down, (e) lashing out at teacher and (f) venting with peers. Reactions to peer-based stressors included (a) being physically, verbally or relationally aggressive, (b) talking it out with the peer, (c) ending friendship, (d) reframing own thoughts to view negative behaviors in different light, (e) ignoring them and (f) taking revenge if betrayed.

In case of community-based stress of feeling unsafe, they called someone close to them to keep their mind "off the scariness" and have witnesses in case anything happened. Thus data clearly shows that stress reactions displayed varied as a function of the age of student, nature of stressor, the context it occurred in and individual differences.

Discussion

The research questions explored with samples of K - 2 and 9 – 11 grade African-American students in two charter schools in New Orleans, Louisiana were: (a) What is appraised as stress by this sample? (b) What are the reactions to stress? (c) What are the differences between children and adolescents in their perspectives of stress and reactions to stress? (d)In what ecological contexts do children and adolescents locate their stressors? Are stress reactions carried out within the same context as the reported stressors?

It is important to note that the results are reported from the child and adolescent's perspectives. Some behaviors from their perspective are perceived as stressful and unfair restrictions, whereas from the adults' perspectives the same may be necessary for the young ones' well-being. Spencer, Dupree, Swanson, and Cunningham (1996) write that within environments where parents may have to protect their adolescents from neighborhood dangers, adolescent-perceived hassles are an indication of parental monitoring activities. Using a phenomenological perspective Cunningham et al. (2002) demonstrated that parental monitoring resulted in positive outcomes for students in terms of academic success and self-esteem. They showed that the relationship between parental monitoring and stressful life events indicated that parents were aware of potential dangers in the neighborhood and, in turn, may have been using parental strategies that ensured academic success for their children.

Some responses in this study indicated stressors and reactions stress that could be commonly experienced by any group of students their age, like academic pressure of tests, getting good grades, or fights with friends or family members. Other responses

clearly reflected the culture of the city and were more specific to it, not just in the responses themselves but sometimes even the terminology participants used was indigenous to the city. For example, "whooping" (spanking) by parents was a common theme. Female headed single parenthood is high in many Black families and this was reflected in the participants' responses in different ways. Younger children spoke of missing their fathers who lived far away, and wished they could spend more time together. Some of the older students complained about fathers never being there for them and one even referred to him simply as the "sperm donor." In regard to discipline practices at home and the implementation of rules and restrictions majority of the time it was the mother who was mentioned with rare instances of mention of father.

Grandparents and aunties were mentioned as loving supports for children to turn to for help, or escape to their homes as "safe places" to make themselves feel better. Children were afraid of losing grandparents to illness or death, showing the significance of their positive influence in the lives of these children. Participants also referred to talking to their aunties for support. These may be a reference of their real aunt, or fictive kin. Fictive kin play a prominent role in the informal support networks of African Americans (Taylor, Chatters, Woodward & Brown, 2013).

According to the 2009 Census data, Blacks constitute the largest ethnic minority group in poverty in American and also have limited upward mobility between generations, thus reflecting an intergenerational trend of poverty (McLoyd, 1998). Social disadvantage is associated with increased stress whether it is defined in terms of race or socioeconomic status. Effects of poverty were glimpsed when students mentioned living in unsafe neighborhoods, or the projects. In the projects or other unsafe neighborhoods

others commonly carried a weapon, or brought it over to them to show it off. Others also mentioned hearing gun shots routinely in the neighborhood, or knowing people who had died from being shot, either accidently or intentionally. The state of affairs is best reflected by the student who said with regard to guns, "I don't do much, I'm used to it its New Orleans...we hear gun shots all time. As long as the gun is not pointed at me, I don't do anything. Yeah, the only time you actually get scared is when it's pointed at you."

In spite of stressors in the community, the results of this study replicate the findings from Chandra and Batada's (2006) study in which they reported that 9th grade African American youth prioritized proximal sources of stress, particularly from school, friends, and family. The number of stressors originating from family, school and peers greatly outnumbered the community based stressors discussed.

As far as the effect of age on stressors and reactions stress is concerned, results are in line with what existing literature suggests. The number of stressors increased with age, as did the exposure of students to more social settings. Reactions to stress showed the exact patterns Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) reported, as children develop,(a) they rely less on behavioral forms of coping; (b) more cognitive strategies are added; (c) positive self-talk and reframing are employed more frequently; and (d) contexts may become more important. Aldwin (2011) writes that maladaptive strategies also arise in adolescents, and that was visible when students talked about cutting themselves, or contemplating suicide, or saying it was alright to take drugs to mentally escape the stressors.

Carlson and Grant (2008) suggest that teaching children and adolescents to use effective coping strategies may be very helpful even when conditions cannot be changed

right away to eradicate the difficult circumstances. It is heartening to see that methods taught to children were received well. Children even as young as 1st graders, who otherwise demonstrated very rudimentary and behavior-based stress reactions talked about deep breathing, or imagining a happy place to calm themselves down, techniques they were taught at school. This is a clear indication that children can not only learn and retain these techniques, but also apply them when required. Regular use of these techniques could possibly replace maladaptive reactions like kicking and being rowdy which lead to demerits and suspension.

Reactions to stress findings show that the participants are equipped with a good skill set of coping techniques. However sometimes they do not have the necessary support to carry those out. For example, students across all age groups talked about needing a calming down period, two to three minutes when they wanted to be isolated. At home they had the luxury of retreating to their rooms, but classroom settings sometimes did not afford them that chance. Also, some young students took comfort in physically hiding or covering themselves. Teachers would benefit from understanding the reasons for student behavior and if a student has withdrawn his head and arms into his shirt, it is not in rebellion to class rules, but to isolate himself and regain composure. Instead, teachers often punish these behaviors of withdrawing or not doing work by moving the clip down or giving demerits, starting a downward spiral of having the student even angrier and then lashing out and being disruptive. Even if such behaviors are unacceptable to the teacher, the students need to be provided alternatives to help themselves calm down, without behaving in a manner that appears inappropriate to the teacher or class rules.

Another example of a reaction stress that students could not effectively use with teachers was that of confrontation. Older students were able to resolve conflicts with peers or even parents by confronting them to stop the offending behavior, or work out a solution with them. Those were difficult conversations but were carried out nonetheless, sometimes, as in the case of peers with another moderator (social worker) available. However, with teachers they felt "helpless." Students in the focus groups welcomed a chance to voice their discontent with the harshness of school rules and teachers' behaviors. It may be useful to provide frequent opportunities to provide safe talking grounds where all parties could communicate without hostility but get their grievances across.

There was much discontent with teachers' behaviors and attitudes. Informal conversations with teachers also showed that they struggled with students' behavioral problems in class. On the other hand, a student in grade 1 was said, "She teaches us not to be angry but she loses her temper at us." If a child that young is able to comprehend this irony, and notice the stress in the teacher, it indicates that the teachers need more support. That would need to be identified about whether they are over worked, need more training to handle behavior issues, or maybe an aide to better manage the class.

The punitive disciplinary approaches used at both schools were reason for much stress. The students' responses showed that the methods were counterproductive; instead of making them comply to class rules it made them angrier and even more rowdy and rebellious. Two problems existed: (a) There were too many behaviors that led to the clip moving down/ getting demerits (b) Behaviors that led to clip moving down/getting demerits were either not clearly defined, or when issued they were not told why it

happened. Many students reported wondering why it happened, or not knowing this behavior would earn them demerits. In any case, even if students knew why they got those they felt penalized and lost motivation to improve.

The establishment of charter schools and the influx of Teach for America teachers are post-Katrina changes that reflect changes in the chronosystem in the city. However, no student mentioned any post-Katrina related changes in the school systems indicating they did not feel the impact as much, or did not find them important. The only reflection of chronosystem came from the statement that students were paddled for failing a test before, but that was no longer allowed.

Implications and Future Directions

Teaching children deep breathing, meditation and other coping mechanisms is clearly very effective. This practice needs to be continued. Also, with slight changes students may be provided opportunities to practice other effective coping techniques they currently use in settings other than the school, like withdrawal. Designated areas at the back of the class where students can retreat, or allowing them some downtime within their seat to read or draw to calm themselves could impact overall environment of the class, as well as the teacher-student relationships.

The efficacy of the punitive disciplinary system needs to be evaluated, and possibly consider replacing it with more positive behavior supports. From the students' perspectives it only seems to be increasing their hostility, and decreasing respect for teacher and compliance to rules. Finally, periodic sessions of teachers training would be fruitful in helping them learn about how students react to stress so they are able to

understand why students behave the way they do, and how to best support them instead of exacerbating the situation by punishing the very behaviors students demonstrate to cope with stress.

Extant literature shows the positive outcomes associated with parental monitoring (Cunningham et al., 2002). If parental monitoring is done constructively and well, and children understand why those rules and restrictions are in place, it may greatly help improve parent-child relationships.

Limitations

This study was a secondary analysis of archival data and since the focus of the original study was a little different the data was short on some information required to answer the questions related to ecological contexts. It would that have been beneficial to better comprehend what the participants' understanding of pressures on others, and reasons for their behaviors were. For example, students spoke vehemently about the teacher's negative behaviors and feeling angry at them in response to their giving demerits. Students viewed themselves at the center of all experiences and in these descriptions of interactions with teachers it would have been useful if follow up questions could be asked regarding why they figured teachers behaved the way they did. That would have enabled the researcher to explore if students recognize the many pressures bearing down on the teacher and whether they attributed her behavior to her personal disposition, grudges against the students, following school policy, or any other myriad of explanations. Helping students recognize the reasons behind teachers' behaviors can possibly be very important in improving teacher-student relations.

Data Trustworthiness and Generalizability

The study was embedded in Nastasi et al.'s (2004) participatory culture specific intervention model (PCSIM) and the researchers had collaborative partnerships with key education and community stakeholders to understand the schools' and community's culture. Knowledge of cultural and contextual factors was attained primarily through ethnographic observations, and through etic knowledge of the city's culture and current and historical events. Persistent with the criteria of prolonged engagement and persistent observation (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005), these activities helped to ensure an accurate understanding of participant phenomenology.

The combination of observations and focus group data allowed for data triangulation and strengthened the reliability and validity of research findings. Data triangulation also encourages thick descriptions of the findings, providing a rich context for understanding the derived constructs (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). Electronically, the original documents were stored in separate files and the data was coded in separate files. Separate files were important to identify how data transformed form one stage of coding to the next creating an audit trail to verify the trustworthiness of the data.

The stressors and reactions to stress were heavily influenced by the culture of the city and the school. Findings can at most be generalized to other African American students in charter schools in the city as they share the conditions with the sample groups as far as school policies, family structure and practices, and neighborhood conditions are concerned.

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Appendix A

Student Consent and Assent Forms

CONSENT FORM: PARENT PERMISSION FOR CHILD/STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Your child is invited to take part in a research study about the well-being of children and adolescents—about the stresses or challenges they face, their feelings and thoughts, and how they deal with difficulties in their lives. He/she was chosen for the study because he/she is student at [INSERT SCHOOL NAME HERE]. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the study.

This study is being conducted by researchers [INSERT RESEARCHER NAMES HERE] from [INSERT INSTITUTION NAME HERE]. This study is part of a larger project being conducted in countries around the world, under the leadership of [RESEARCHER NAME], USA, and with the approval of the International School Psychology Association.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to find out what various people--students, parents, teachers and others who work with children and adolescents in schools or communities--think is important for promoting children's and adolescents' well-being.

Procedures

If you agree that your child can take part in this study, he/she will be asked to:

- Participate in a group activity with several other students of the same age on two occasions of about one hour each during the school day. The activity will involve discussing, writing and drawing.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want your child to be in the study. No one at [INSERT SCHOOL NAME HERE] will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. If your child feels stressed during the study, he/she may stop at any time. Your child also may skip any questions that he/she feels are too personal.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

It's possible that being in this project might lead your child to think about situations that are upsetting. But the project will help us to better understand the difficulties faced by students and how we might better help them to face those difficulties. The overall benefit of this study is that the information will help us to better design programs that can help parents and schools foster children's well-being.

If you have particular concerns about your child, we will provide you with information where you can seek help, either through the school or in your community.

Compensation

Neither you nor your child will receive any money or gifts for participating in the study.

Confidentiality

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or your child's on anything else that could identify you in any reports of the study. We will ask the other children who participate in the group to keep information others share confidential. The only time we would reveal information is if I learn about something that suggests your child or other children may be in danger (of being harmed).

Parental Consent to Audiotape: Child Participants

In order to facilitate accurate recording of my discussion with your child, I will audiotape the session. The tape will be used only for the purposes of this research. If you agree to audiotaping, please indicate your agreement below.

Contacts and Questions

The researchers are [INSERT RESEARCHER NAMES HERE]. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researchers by phone at [INSERT RESEARCHER PHONE NUMBER(S) HERE]. You can also reach them by email at [INSERT RESEARCHER EMAIL ADDRESS(ES)]. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call [INSERT INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD PHONE NUMBER].

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent for Your Child to Participate

☐ I have read the above information. I have received answers to any questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age or older, and I give consent for my child to participate in the study.

Child's Name (Please Print): _____

Parent's Name (Please Print): _____

Parent's Signature: _____

Statement of Consent for Audiotaping:

☐ I have read the above information. I have received answers to any questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age or older, and I give consent for my child's participation to be audiotaped.

Parent's Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Student Assent Form

Hello, we are student researchers from [INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL HERE], and we are doing a project to learn about experiences and challenges faced by students your age. We are inviting you to join our project. We picked you for this project because you are a student at this school. We are going to read this form with/to you. You can ask any questions you have before deciding if you want to do this project.

About the project

If you agree to join this project, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a group activity with 5 to 7 other students your age on five or six occasions. We will meet for about one hour each time during your seminar period.

- The topics we will discuss are the challenges or stresses that student face and how they deal with those stresses. The activities will include discussion with other students and individual drawing and writing.

It's your choice

You don't have to join this project if you don't want to. You won't get into trouble with your family, anyone at [INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL HERE], or anyone from [INSERT NAME OF INSTITUTION HERE] if you say no. If you decide now that you want to join the project, you can still change your mind later just by telling me. If you want to skip some parts of the project, just let me know.

It's possible that being in this project might lead you to think about situations that upset you. But this project might help others by learning the challenges that students your age face and how we can better help them to face those challenges.

Privacy

Everything you tell me during this project will be kept private. That means that no one else will know your name or what answers you gave. We also will ask all students in the group not to share names or answers of other students. The only time I have to tell someone is if I learn about something that could hurt you or someone else.

Asking Questions

You can ask me any questions you want now. If you think of a question later, you or your parents can reach us by phone at [INSERT RESEARCH TEAM PHONE NUMBER] or by email at [INSERT RESEARCH TEAM EMAIL ADDRESS]. If you or your parents would like to ask our university a question, you can call [INSERT INSTITUTION PHONE NUMBER].

We will give you a copy of this form

Please sign your name below if you want to join this project.

Name of Participant

Participant Signature

_____

Researcher Signature

_____

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

Session 1: Focus Group Discussion

STEP 1: GENERAL QUESTIONS [Note: each of these questions has 2 parts—e.g., what is a 'good' student? What is a 'not good or poor' student? Be sure to use terminology that is culturally and age appropriate.]

1. Describe a good (not good) student

   [*alternative*: What is expected of children/adolescents your age in school?]

2. Describe a good (not good) friend

   [*alternative*: What is expected of friends your age?]

3. Describe a good (not good) citizen

   [*alternative*: What are children/adolescents your age expected to contribute to your community, society, country?]

4. Describe a good (not good) parent.

5. Describe a good (not good) teacher

****

STEP 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT EMOTIONS

1. Ask the group to brainstorm list of feeling words—identify age-appropriate terminology for the following concepts—happy, sad, angry, scared/frightened, confused, etc. [Use those terms in asking questions that follow.] The objective is to identify culture-specific or context-specific feeling words.

2. Feelings—for each feeling concept/category [happy, sad, angry, frightened, confused], ask the following questions:

    a. What makes children/adolescents [your age group] feel [emotion]?

    b. How can you tell if someone is feeling [emotion]?

    c. How do children/adolescents [your age group] express [emotion]?

    d. What can someone do when feeling [emotion] to make themselves feel better?

    e. What can you do for a friend who is feeling [emotion]?

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STEP 3: QUESTIONS ABOUT SOURCES OF DISTRESS

1. From the list of sources of feelings of distress [sad, angry, frightened, confused—i.e., responses to item 2a], identify three to five common sources of distress for the age group. Examples of sources of distress include academic pressure, parental conflict, or violence in the community. The objective is to identify culture-specific or context-specific stressors.

2. For each source of distress, ask the following:

Suppose you [or other children/adolescents in your age group experienced this [source of distress]

    a. How would you [they] feel? [encourage group to generate multiple feeling concepts]

    b. What would you [they] do? How would you react?

    c. To whom could you [they] turn for help?

d. What effect would this experience [source of distress] have on you [children/adolescents in your age group]?

Biography

Zainab J. Siddiqui, M.Sc. received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Kinnaird College for Women in Lahore, Pakistan, and a Master of Science degree in Applied Psychology with specialization in Counseling from University of the Punjab, at Lahore, Pakistan. Having worked as a counselor with children in impoverished environments in Pakistan and then as part of her training in the US, her interest is in looking at the impact of culture on children's perceptions of stress and differences in coping styles.