

CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL CHILDREN'S
VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPORT
SYSTEMS: A SECONDARY ANALYSIS OF THE
PROMOTING PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING
GLOBALLY PROJECT

AN ABSTRACT SUBMITTED ON THE 6th DAY OF
NOVEMBER 2018 TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
PSYCHOLOGY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS OF THE SCHOOL OF SCIENCE
AND ENGINEERING OF TULANE UNIVERSITY FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE

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Abstract

Multicultural psychologists have discussed the growing concern over ecological validity in understanding children's mental health: insufficient participatory efforts to incorporate marginalized perspectives have led to a subsequent lack of inclusive, culturally sensitive definitions of support and support systems. The phenomenology around experiences, beliefs and perceptions is an integral component in describing support and support systems, where the composition and content of support systems depend on context and culture. Using archival qualitative research data from focus groups and ecomaps conducted with elementary school-aged children across 9 of the 14 international sites in the Promoting Psychological Well-Being Globally (*PPWBG*) project (Nastasi & Borja, 2016), the present research used children's voices in identifying contextually-relevant sources of support, as well as patterns across 9 of the 14 sites. The present research was a part of a multi-method study, serving as a secondary analysis to triangulate (across two methods) previously analyzed data elicited from the focus groups (Borja et al., 2016) and ecomap tool (Borja et al., 2017). The goal of triangulation was to examine for consistent themes related to support and enhance the credibility of the combined tools' ability to elicit data around support. The triangulation yielded 33 codes related to systems of support for psychological well-being. A

thematic analysis condensed the codes into 5 broad themes:

Financial/Material Support, Emotional Support, Social Support, Recreational Activities and Academic Support. These themes were salient across the nine sites. Ultimately, the five themes were either identified as being possibly global or context-specific, which may be useful in future research to inform practice and instrument development.

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Introduction

Research has largely characterized support systems as (a) integral to human development, (b) typically comprised as people who are present within a child's close ecology, suggesting proximity and intimacy with the child, and (c) comprised of peers and adults who can scaffold knowledge and support the child. Support systems are integral to children's overall development of their psychological, behavioral and socioemotional well-being. For children, support systems can help develop, stabilize and normalize children's socioemotional traits (e.g., empathy, understanding), positive behaviors, values, and belief about themselves and others (Ciarrocchi et al., 2017). Strong support systems also can mediate and mitigate risk factors associated with internalizing and externalizing behaviors, suicidal ideation, social isolation and the development of psychopathology (Liu et al., 2017). Across different cultures, various support systems remain stable as integral systems for psychological well-being (Cheung & Sim, 2014).

While support systems are generally perceived to be a positive phenomenon for children, children's perspectives have not been typically included in how support systems are defined. Borja, Nastasi and Sarkar (2017) have advocated for the inclusion of children's perspectives in the literature around the definition and content of support systems, using child rights' perspectives to guide the platform. Child rights perspective upholds the protection of children and their rights. Prompted by the creation of the Convention on Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), this perspective advocates for the creation of societies that are conducive for physical, mental, and emotional well-being

and needs of children (Nastasi, 2014). The child rights perspective advocates for support systems that inherently meet child needs with respect and fidelity. The multicultural perspective focuses on the impact of cultural and contextual factors in the psychological development of children (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Culture is important in creating and defining support systems, where cultural traditions, values and perceptions of various phenomenon help to define the needs and requirements of a “supportive” system. Furthermore, culture itself can become infused into support systems, providing context and guidelines for how children perceive systems of support (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor, 2014). Typically for elementary-aged children, social and emotional support systems are based heavily in ecological context: support systems tend to center around contexts that children frequent and with which they are familiar (e.g., home, school, afterschool activities).

The combination of child rights and multicultural perspectives suggest that support systems for children need to be conducive to child development: support systems need to be valid, and based on children’s needs, which are rooted in their context and culture. Both perspectives recognize that historical and traditional power dynamics have dually failed to represent the voices of children and racial-ethnic minority cultural groups, while unfairly casting the perception that children and racial and ethnic minority cultural groups lack the appropriate amount of autonomy, and social value to define their own experiences (Spencer, 2008). Both perspectives posit that the majority of existing research on support systems is framed around Western adults’ sociocultural perceptions and conceptualization of support, suggesting that both children and marginalized populations may not have their perspectives of support systems examined nor validated.

Ultimately, this serves as the problem, where the ‘missing piece’ of the conversation around support systems is the minimal exploration of children’s perspective in defining their own support systems from their specific cultural context (Kohout, Pate, & Maton, 2013; Spencer, 2008).

The use of qualitative methodology and a phenomenological research framework would place the perspectives of the participants at the foreground of research, in this case, grounding the research in the perspectives of children (Ponterotto, 2010). Both child rights and multicultural perspectives support the use of qualitative methodology, advocating for a participatory approach where those of traditionally marginalized and underprivileged groups (e.g., children, minorities) must be active agents in any decision-making (e.g., research) that has the potential to impact their lives (Spencer, 2008; UN Convention on Rights of the Child, 1989). By only allowing the researchers (instead of the participants) to make *a priori* assumptions about support systems, current research may be missing an important component of understanding the structure and importance of support systems. With the inclusion of children’s voices around their own support systems, psychologists can understand whom, what, where and how support systems are defined by children.

The *Promoting Psychological Well Being Globally* project, or PPWBG (Nastasi & Borja, 2016), has effectively incorporated child voices through the use of a phenomenological framework, furthering knowledge around the development of and maintenance of support systems for children across different cultural boundaries. The PPWBG included fourteen international sites across 12 different countries, with children aged 6-19 in elementary, middle and high schools. The project examined children’s

interpretation of their own lived experiences (from within the context of their own culture) around support, stressors and coping mechanisms. The use of two different qualitative tools –focus groups and ecomaps –provided researchers with a breadth of information on children’s cultural perspectives about the values and composition of their support systems. Prior analyses of the two data sources have yielded separate themes and codes associated with how children perceive their support systems across different cultural contexts (Borja, Nastasi & Sarkar, 2017; Nastasi & Borja, 2016; Nastasi, Borja, & Summerville, 2018). Triangulation of the data across these two sources could provide more reliable information on global and culture-specific patterns for primary school-aged children’s support systems (Carter et al., 2014).

Using a phenomenological framework to guide qualitative methodology, the research served as a re-analysis of available focus group and ecomaps data sources across 9 of the 14 sites, for primary school children (ages 6-11). The purpose of the research was to triangulate codes generated separately from focus groups and ecomaps to strengthen validity of findings. The research also has the potential for enhancing our understanding and interpretation of children’s perceptions on their support systems. The questions guiding the proposed research are: (a) How do primary school-aged children perceive and conceptualize their support systems within their own cultural context? (b) How do those conceptualizations vary across different cultural contexts? [For the purpose of this research cultural context refers to geographical location in which children live, specifically, local communities within the nine different sites.]

Literature Review

The literature review was conducted using several different methods. The primary method was searching through the literature base for the *Promoting Psychological Well Being Globally* project, particularly focusing on the keywords used to describe publications generated from the project. A second method involved using the identified keywords to search on online, interdisciplinary academic databases (e.g., ERIC, JSTOR), using search terms such as: *support system, child, emotional support, social support, cultural perspectives, coping mechanisms, coping skills, and instrumental support*. The term support is often defined as any source that has the ability to provide a buffer between an individual's well-being and stressors (Cohen & McKay, 1984). Subsequently, support systems are networks comprised of identified, stable sources of support. In general, there is strong theory for how support and support systems work. Cohen and Willis (1985) posited two models in conceptualizing support systems: (a) the Stress-Buffer model, where social (and other) ties have the ability to create a barrier between an individual's well-being and the source of stress, and (b) the Main Effect model where support systems generally enhance and 'boost' an individual's well-being and life quality by bolstering self-esteem. Support systems are commonly conceptualized as being interchangeable with close, quality interpersonal relationships; cross-cultural studies demonstrate stable perceptions of support as being nurturing interpersonal relationships with family and/or friends (Borja et al., 2017; Höllinger & Haller, 1990; Taylor et al., 2004). However, support is not limited to common characterizations of emotionally-close

relationships with other human beings: it can be any relationship or interaction with a person, community or object that primarily acts as a buffer between stress and well-being. Furthermore, Borja, Nastasi, and Sarkar (2017) draw upon previous literature to illustrate different functions of support, where the relationship or interaction can provide the individual with experiences and feelings of: connectedness (*social support*), love and nurturance (*emotional support*), receiving assistance (*informational support*) and receiving financial or material assistance (*instrumental support*).

Regardless of the source of support, support systems are integral to children's development, as they provide children and adolescents with a necessary buffer between stress and their well-being (Ciarrocchi et al., 2017; Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cohen & Willis, 1985). In accordance with Main Effect theory (Cohen & Willis, 1985), research indicates that effective support systems generally help to improve children's well-being (Ciarrocchi et al., 2017; Kohout et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2017; Piquart, 2017). Strong, positive support systems are effective in mediating and mitigating outcomes, such as internalizing and externalizing behaviors, suicidal ideation, social isolation and the development of psychopathology (Liu et al., 2017; Shavitt et al., 2016).

Given the wealth of literature on support systems, research indicates that the general benefits of support systems are documented across cultures: for example, Cheung and Sim (2014) point out that in a sample of Chinese-Singaporean adolescents, student outcomes indicate increased feelings of self-worth, lowered stress and other positive emotions – similar to Western samples – indicating that support systems have an overall positive effect on children. The literature illustrates that positive outcomes are associated

with the presence of an effective support system, with consistent outcomes across many different cultures and contexts (Kohout et al., 2013; Shavitt et al., 2016).

Chu, Saucier and Hafner (2010) point out that support and support systems are still multidimensional constructs, with a diverse set of definitions and measurements, which inhibits development of a universal operational definition of (a) what constitutes support and support systems, and (b) how to measure the support systems and their utility. Researchers have come to understand support systems as a construct in measuring effectiveness in terms of social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes; few studies examine how children conceptualize support and the configurations of support systems.

Chu, Saucier, and Hafner (2010) recommend that researchers re-examine commonly used methodology for examining support systems, suggesting a more direct focus on support system configuration (e.g., 'who' or 'what' constitutes as support) and perceptions of support. Ultimately, research has already indicated the importance and benefits of support systems across culture and contexts. Despite consistency in outcomes, the specific composition and content of effective support systems may mediate the relationship between outcomes and support (Borja, Nastasi, Adelson, & Siddiqui, 2015; Cheung & Sim, 2014). Chu, Saucier, and Hafner (2010) also propose that the composition and content of a support system may influence the relationship between support and outcome and should be considered as pertinent variables when discussing support systems. Furthermore, Borja and colleagues (2017) have called for researchers to re-orient their approach to studying support systems through analyzing the content of support systems, rather than outcomes. In the reconceptualization of support systems, researchers urge that the content of support systems must be defined from the child's

perspective and context. Nastasi, Borja, and Summerville (2018) also suggest moving away from strictly quantitative methodology (typically based in *a priori* research assumptions) to implement a mixed-method approach that utilizes child voices in a phenomenological framework.

The focus of research was to examine children's perspectives of support systems from within their different cultural contexts. Although there is a breadth of existing research on support systems, there are two major concerns regarding narrow focus on effectiveness, and exclusion of children's voices. Existing research on support systems is largely quantitative, with a highly narrow focus on effectiveness of support systems; existing research has not explored the definition of support, instead using *a priori* definitions of support to focus on correlational relationships between support and outcomes. While existing research has included children as participants, there has been minimal exploration of the conceptualization of support systems from the perspective of children. Existing research on children's support systems have only incorporated children's perceptions of quality or frequency of received support, rather than the composition of support systems or definitions of support (Borja, Nastasi, Adelson & Siddiqui, 2015; Chu, Saucier & Hafner, 2010). Ultimately, Borja and colleagues (2015) point out that support systems differ across cultures, and researchers must consider cultural differences when discussing support systems. The composition of support systems may vary culture-to-culture, where culture and context-specific values and needs can influence how children conceptualize support.

In order to assess contextual frameworks of support systems from the perspective of children, the foundations of the proposed research are (a) a phenomenological

framework, encompassing a multicultural and child's rights perspectives, and (b) a participatory research approach in understanding children's perspectives of support systems. Stone (1979) describes the phenomenology as both a philosophical perspective and research framework, where human perception and awareness of ones' experiences creates a reality. Phenomenological approaches posit that an experience cannot be interpreted outside of the individual's own perception, evaluation and interpretation of the experience. Simply, an outside source (such as a researcher) cannot dictate the meaning of an experience; the only legitimate voice and perspective in interpretation of an experience, would be the individual with the experience. Nastasi, Moore, and Varjas (2004) posited that the phenomenology around experiences, beliefs and perceptions are an integral component in creating a culturally-informed, operational definitions of psychological constructs, such as well-being and self-esteem. Ultimately, perceptions influence how children create consistent coping responses to contextual-related stressors that will persist on into adolescence and adulthood. This framework supports the use of participant voices as the primary --and preferably, only-- source to guide interpretation and understanding of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Nastasi, Borja, & Summerville, 2018; Spencer, 2008; Stone, 1979).

Several different paradigms in psychology utilize a phenomenology as a philosophical approach and preferred research framework, particularly focusing on how the voices of clients, research participants and stakeholders are centered. Child rights and multicultural perspectives are two paradigms that encourage and oftentimes demand for research to be participatory. Advocates of the child rights perspective necessitate the protection of children and their rights in societies that support their physical, mental, and

emotional well-being (Doeck, 2014; Nastasi, 2014). Advocates of the child rights perspective require the inclusion of children's voices in decision-making, making children as the most valid spokespersons for themselves. The perspective is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which created global standards for the treatment, dignity, care and basic needs and rights for children across the world.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; 1989) explicitly supports the idea that children have the right to voice opinions in decisions that affect them, and adults in power must provide a platform for their perspectives; Article 12 of the UNCRC specifically states that children are "...capable of forming his or her own views" and thus must be given "...the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child..." (pp. 4). This right implicates that children must be active agents in decision-making processes that have the ability to impact them; this does not just refer to law or judicial areas, but also in the process of research. Nastasi (2014) uses the child's right document to explicate the idea of involving children as stakeholders in the research process, pointing out that development of research itself could lead to increased validity in results, and increased acceptability during dissemination. Ultimately, advocates of the child rights perspective actively suggest the inclusion of child voice necessitates research that is done *with* and *by* children, suggesting participatory approaches. The child rights perspective advocates for the creation of support systems that inherently meet child needs with appropriate respect and accuracy.

The multicultural perspective focuses on the impact of cultural and contextual factors in the psychological, socioemotional, and neurobiological development of

children (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). The multicultural perspective posits that by understanding the impact of different cultural nuances on a context, psychologists can conduct research, create interventions and adapt existing ones, and provide clinical services that fit appropriately into the cultural model. Similarly, Ponterotto (2010) stresses the use of qualitative methodology in multicultural perspective, positing that it is in alignment with APA (2003) guidelines and tenets for multicultural training, research and practice. Ponterotto (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of multicultural psychological research that incorporated qualitative methodology, finding four common themes and goals present within the studies: (a) valid representations of concepts and phenomenon, (b) equal participation and power balance, (c) stakeholder empowerment, and (d) participant exposure to measures and instruments that fit worldview. Ultimately, use of participants' voices in considering culture and context can become infused into support systems, providing context and guidelines for how children perceive systems of support (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor, 2014).

The commonalities between the phenomenological framework and multicultural perspective are grounded in the advancement of intersectional voices. *Intersectionality*, a term coined by Crenshaw (1994), describes a unique personal experience where different entities of identities intersect to culminate in an individual's personal identity. Originally used within Women's Studies, the definition and use of *intersectionality* has spread across disciplines, with the field of Psychology supporting the idea that people can possess multiple sociocultural identities that co-exist and intersect. APA (2017) has updated multicultural guidelines to also define *intersectionality* to refer to unique experiences that can occur based on the culmination – or intersection -- of identity and

culture. When looking at phenomenon (e.g., support systems) for children across different contexts, Cole (2009) posits that researchers must be able to understand that particular experiences can be mitigated, moderated, amplified or not even present dependent on the intersection of identity; thus, intersectionality calls for researchers to listen to the individuals' perception of their own experiences, rather than making *a priori* assumptions based on the individuals' state or assumed identity.

Both child rights' perspective and multicultural perspectives are grounded in ecological theories, where the main idea in understanding context-driven needs is simple: there must be open, specific communication between the researchers and participants about culture and context-specific needs, ideas, perceptions, barriers and supports. Ecological systems theories address how context exists and situates in the lives of children, which include models like the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Integrative Model (García Coll et al., 1996), and the Phenomenological Variant of the Ecological Systems Theory (Spencer, 1995, 2006). Bronfenbrenner (1979), García Coll and colleagues (1996) and Spencer (1995, 2006) all posit that culture and context provide a lens through which the child may perceive their life.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) presented his ecological model as five environment-driven systems that considered external factors that could impact a child's life; the systems depended on the proximity to the child, and were arranged so factors could be identified from within the environments the child interacts with on a personal level (e.g., microsystem) to large-scale events, environments, and beliefs that would indirectly impact the child (e.g., chronosystem, macro-system). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model has been applied to both developmental psychology and multicultural psychology, as a

way to identify external factors (e.g., social and cultural values) and understand whether a developmental phenomenon is universal or specific to a certain culture.

In the wake of an increasingly multicultural, globalized world, a paradigm shift – initiated in the 1990s and 2000s– has focused on culture as a large part of ecological context, ultimately shaping the path of psychological, social and biological development. Culture is often defined by its visible and tangible artifacts, such as linguistic, musical, artistic, culinary and other types of customs, traditions and practices; however, culture also stands as an implicit and explicit system of values, perceptions, beliefs and actions that can be passed through artifacts (Greenfield, 2000). Multicultural psychology posits culture as guiding an individual to evaluate and construct meaning of their experiences, mediating psychological processes through its' unique filter (Lu & Wan, 2018; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

In considering the importance of culture, researchers must understand what specific topics and sources are used to define support and create support systems from the perspective of the research participants from within their own context and culture. The Integrative model (Garcia Coll et al., 1996) and Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems model, or PVEST (Spencer, 1995, 2006) both work in tandem to give the proposed research a theoretical model for how culture and context impact support systems. This process includes using the Integrative Model (Garcia Coll et al., 1996) to (a) identify specific contexts that are (b) both salient and contribute to children's sociocultural identity; PVEST (Spencer, 1995, 2006) examines (c) how sociocultural identity within a context may provide negative experiences that (d) may require help and support from (e) identified support systems.

From a global perspective, it is important to understand what artifacts (e.g., social values, perceptions, and beliefs) exist across national, regional, cultural, religious, and racial and ethnic contexts as mediums for sociocultural identity formation. These multiple contexts inform and contribute to the creation of a child's sociocultural identity. The Integrative Model implies that children will have experiences that are entirely dependent on their sociocultural identity. PVEST posits that the interaction between local society and the child may leave the child with experiences that may require support to navigate or adequately cope with. From experiences (that result via interactions with a specific context), children are able to process and conceptualize their experiences, leading them to identify systems of support and coping skills to alleviate the impact of these stressors. This is integral to the proposed research, where different local contexts across different countries will provide different experiences for children and their social identities, and the interactions between specific contexts and a child influence a child's perception and creation of their social support systems.

Participatory research approaches are posited as effective methodologies for investigating and incorporating participants' voices in order to understand a phenomenon (e.g., using a phenomenological framework) from the perspective of participants, with respect to their culture and context. David, Okazaki, and Giroux (2014) provide support for participatory-based research: because participatory models are based on the real beliefs and thoughts of stakeholders, it is important to understand the experiences that may influence perceptions and identity. Similarly, Spencer (2006) identifies processes and perceptions of culture-laden experiences as important in identification. Ultimately, perceptions feed into how children will create consistent coping responses to contextual-

related stressors that will persist on into adolescence and adulthood. The Participatory Culture-Specific Intervention Model (PCSIM; Nastasi, Moore & Varjas, 2004) is a multi-phase model that uses participatory methodology. Embedded in ecological theory, PCSIM is used in the formation and implementation of interventions, tools and measures, as well as research process that consider wider culture and context of target population to ensure fidelity, validity and acceptability. Divided into a research and intervention phase, the research phase of PCSIM outlines six (6) steps researchers use to understand constructs such as support and support systems from the context of the specific culture. The six steps outline a process of engaging community stakeholders to learn and identify (a) cultural and contextual history and current information, (b) perceptions and values around the target construct (e.g., support systems), and (c) problems and solutions. The *Promoting Psychological Well-Being Globally (PPWBG)* project (Nastasi & Borja, 2016) utilizes the participatory-research oriented PCSIM model to inform the development of ecologically valid constructs and subsequent tools to measure psychological well-being. Particularly, the PPWBG project explores how mental health is defined and promoted in different cultures and settings. The project identified cross-cultural and site-specific characteristics of social supports, stressors, and coping strategies, based on separate analyses of ecomap data and focus group data.

As an initial step of the PPWBG project, Borja and colleagues (2016) examined the data solicited from the focus groups, identifying salient themes related to support systems for primary school children (ages 6-11). Across 75% or more of the sites, participants identified emotional support from peers and family, advice and guidance, engaging in recreational/preferred activities, and giving and receiving material support;

50% or more mentioned conversation (talking/listening) and self-support. At less than 50% of the sites participants mentioned celebrations as a source of support. In addition, some site-specific and gender-specific themes were found, for example, empathy for boys in Greece and weather (in the context of being able to participate in preferred activities) for boys in Estonia. Narratives around the themes provided more contextual information on how support is conceptualized. For example, children conceptualized emotional support as physical and verbal comfort (e.g., “I just hold her hand, I give her a hug”, “...saying he can do it and tell him to calm down”) or using humor (“...joke[s] that make me feel more joyful”). These findings were derived solely from the focus group data set and did not include ecomap data.

Borja and colleagues (2017) identified salient support themes for children and adolescents aged 4 to 19 years using the ecomap data from the PPWBG project. The analysis indicated that most themes had low to minimal levels of convergence across the sites, suggesting that some themes were not particularly salient cross-culturally. However, a few themes showed higher levels of convergence: Children in 75% or more of the sites discussed support themes around receiving affection, positive treatment from supportive peers and adults, and receiving help. Participants in 50% to 74% of the sites mentioned advice and guidance, receiving material support, recreational activities, interpersonal interactions, love and nurturance as sources of support. Participants in 25% or less of sites, including site-specific (one or two sites mention theme) level themes, included themes that encompassed asking for permission, limitations, and providing encouragement and help. Cultural and contextual factors were surmised to play a role in the sources of support available for the children.

The themes, based on separate data sources (Borja et al., 2016, 2017), may only represent the voices and perspectives of children who participated with that specific tool and thus may be influenced by the method of data collection. The proposed re-analysis and integration of the focus group and ecomap are intended to increase the reliability and validity of the findings through multi-method approach.

Methods

The research examined two research questions: (a) How do primary school-aged children perceive and conceptualize their support systems within their own cultural context? (b) How do those conceptualizations vary across different cultural contexts? For the purpose of this research, *cultural context* refers to geographical location in which children live, specifically, local communities present in the 12 different countries. The present study used archival data from the *Promoting Psychological Well-Being Globally* project (PPWBG; Borja et al., 2015; Borja et al., 2017; Nastasi, & Borja, 2016) to (a) re-analyze existing data and triangulate themes of support systems derived from two qualitative tools, focus groups and ecomaps; (2) compile identified themes from re-analysis of ecomap data and focus group data; and (3) determine levels of convergence across data from the two methods (focus groups and ecomaps) and across sites for 9 of the 14 sites that included data from both focus groups and ecomaps.

Promoting Psychological Well Being Globally Project

Background and Participants

The original PPWBG project (see Nastasi & Borja, 2016) was conducted with school-aged children in 14 sites (cities or communities) across 12 countries ($N_{Ecomap\ Data} = 817$, $N_{Focus\ Group\ Data} = 877$). The participants were grouped into Primary, Middle, and Secondary (High) school-grade levels, according to their age and grade; the age of the participants ranged from 6 to 19, which was dependent on each respective country's demographic information. Data collection involved two qualitative methods, focus

groups and ecomap activities; all data were collected in the participants' primary language, and transcribed and translated to English by respective local research teams. Existing research partnerships were responsible for creating the local research teams; each local research team was responsible for developing relationships and collaborations with local schools or community sites to recruit participants.

Individual site teams were asked to recruit between 48 and 64 student participants, suggesting a minimum of 16 per grade level, and 8 per gender. The collected data was compiled, transcribed and translated by the respective local research team; each research team was also responsible for sending finalized data to Dr. Nastasi. Finalized data that was not submitted to Dr. Nastasi was considered unavailable. The current study examined data from nine out of twelve countries that had both focus group and ecomap data available for primary school-age participants.

Data Collection Methods

For the PPWBG, data were collected from student-participants using two methods: focus groups and ecomaps. The data sources for this study were transcripts of focus groups and narratives from ecomaps. (A full description of methods with administration guidelines can be found in Nastasi & Borja, 2016.) Focus group and ecomap procedures are described in this section.

Focus Groups. Derived from the phenomenological perspective, focus groups allowed children to provide information on the contextual and cultural values associated with salient support systems (Borja, Nastasi, Adelson & Siddiqui, 2015). Structured as interview sessions –lasting an average of one hour – , these focus groups provided in-depth information on how children perceive and conceptualize their social systems. The

focus groups were conducted in small same- or mixed-gender groups of 6 to 8 students, where students were within similar age groups (e.g., a group with students aged 8-10 years old). The full scope of the focus group questions addressed the participants' perceptions and established values for themselves, their parents, communities, peers, and potential supports and stressors. The questions were semi-structured, allowing facilitators to adapt based on the children's developmental level, and potential context-driven language.

To elicit answers around support, primary school-aged children were first asked to identify common emotions and feelings as a proxy for stress, such as sadness, anger, as well as feelings associated with positive well-being. Using the students' own words, the students were presented with various, developmentally appropriate scenarios that asked students to conceptualize something (a support) that would provide a buffer between themselves and the stressful scenario. An example of a scenario presented to primary school-aged children aged 6 to 8 would be similar to: "Who/what could help you when feeling [identified emotion]" (see Nastasi & Borja, 2016 for complete protocol and sample transcript of questions).

Ecomaps. Ecomap activities involved participants creating graphic representations of their immediate social circles; participants were then asked (a) to evaluate their depicted social relationships as supportive, stressful, or containing both supports and stressors (ambivalent), and (b) to provide narratives about supportive and stressful experiences within the respective relationships. Nastasi and Borja (2016) posit that ecomaps provide both visual and narrative representation of children's social systems, keying in on specific social relationships that may be supportive, and the specific content

around the relationship. Ecomap activities aim to effectively answer the questions about who or what supports a child, and how the represented relationship provided support (see Nastasi & Borja, 2016 for complete protocol and sample transcript of questions).

Previous Findings

Separate analyses of the data by country and by method (focus group, ecomap) had previously been conducted and compiled (see Nastasi & Borja, 2016, for reports by country). The initial themes were generated through an inductive coding process based on the content and discussion of individual narratives/transcripts. Essentially, each individual narrative provides specific context for the meaning of the code: for example, a code of *Material Support* includes narratives around a child's perception of material and financial support, such as receiving a toy, allowance or any other tangible reward. Each data source was inductively coded based on the narratives elicited from the respective tool; for example, the ecomap data source was coded based on the narratives elicited from the use of the ecomap activity. The two data collection tools yielded different sets of themes: 51 support themes from ecomap narratives (see Table 1; Borja, Nastasi, & Sarkar, 2017) and 25 support themes from focus group transcripts (see Table 2; Borja et al., 2016).

*Table 1**List of a priori ecomap codes, in alphabetical order*

<u>A-I</u>	<u>J-Z</u>
Advice/Guidance	Knowing/Living with
Arguing/Fighting	Someone/Someplace/Something for a Long
Attention/Interest	Time
Being Able to Problem Solve,	Learning/Studying/Practicing
Compromise, or Make Up	Lessens/Break from Academic/Social
Being Taught (Well)	Expectations/Pressures
Being Trusted	Love/Affection
Characteristics of Person, Place, or	Makes Sacrifices/Goes Out of Way for
Thing (General)	Child
Companionship	Material Support
Consistency/Trustworthiness	Others Knowing/Wanting/Doing What is
Cooperative/Non-Aggressive	Best for You
Relationship/Treatment by Others	Permission to Engage in
"Does Things that I Want"	Recreation/Activity
Emotional/Social Approval/Acceptance	Physical Space/Distance from Others
Engages in Prosocial/Desirable	Play/Sport
Behaviors with Others	Positive Performance Outcome/Fulfilling
Friendship/Membership in Peer Group	Expectations
"Going Out (Together)"	Providing Academic/Instructional Help
Having a "Deep Connection" or	Providing Emotional Support (Non-
"Emotional Bond"	descript)
"Having a Good Time Together" (Non-	Providing Empathy
descript)	Providing Encouragement
Having an Open/Honest Relationship	Providing Help (Non-descript)
Having Limitations	Providing Nurturance/Care/Protection
Help to Create Social Bonds	Talking/Listening
Help to Engage in Recreation/Activity	Receiving Academic/Instructional Help
Holiday/Celebration	Receiving Emotional Support (Non-
Humor/Humorous	descript)
Independence/Autonomy from Parents	Receiving Empathy/Understanding
	Receiving Encouragement
	Receiving Help (Non-descript)
	Receiving Nurturance/Care/Protection
	Receiving Sympathy
	Recreation/Activity - Other
	Sharing Similar Interests/Qualities
	Talking/Listening

Adapted from "Children's voices about the function of their social supports: Multicountry perspectives," by A.P. Borja, B.K. Nastasi, and S. Sarkar, 2017, *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology*, 5(3), pp. 160. Copyright 2017 by Taylor & Francis. Adapted with permission.

Table 2

List of a priori focus group codes, in alphabetical order

Achievement/Accomplishing goals	Online community
Activities with others or by self	Outings/Activities with self or others
Comfort	Peers
Community members	Pets
Emotional support	Physical Affection/touching
Empathy	Praise/encouragement
Family	Providing Space/Leaving self/others alone
Giving/sharing/Receiving	Religion/Spirituality
rewards/gifts	Self
Guidance/Advice	School staff
Help seeking/receiving	Supportive people
Learning	Talking to others/Listening
Love	Trustworthiness/Dependability/Unconditional
Media	Support

Adapted from "Cross Cultural Patterns of Children's Phenomenology About Stressors and Supports," by A.P. Borja, B.K. Nastasi, E. Adelson, and Z.J. Siddiqui, in B.K. Nastasi and A.P. Borja (Eds.), *International Handbook of Psychological Well-Being in Children and Adolescents: Bridging the Gaps Between Theory, Research and Practice* (p. 306-307), 2016, New York: Springer. Copyright 2016 by Springer. Adapted with permission.

Focus group findings. As an initial step of the PPWBG project, Borja and colleagues (2016) examined the data solicited from the focus groups, identifying salient themes related to support systems for primary school children (ages 6-11). Across 75% of more of the sites, participants identified emotional support from peers and family, advice and guidance, engaging in recreational/preferred activities, and giving and receiving material support; 50% or more mentioned conversation (talking/listening) and

self-support. Less than 50% of the sites mentioned celebrations as a source of support. In addition, some site-specific and gender-specific themes were found, for example, empathy for boys in Greece and weather (in the context of being able to participate in preferred activities) for boys in Estonia. Narratives around the themes provided more contextual information on how support was conceptualized. For example, children conceptualized emotional support as physical and verbal comfort (e.g., “I just hold her hand, I give her a hug”, “...saying he can do it and tell him to calm down”) or using humor (“...joke[s] that make me feel more joyful”). These findings were derived solely from the focus group data set and did not include ecomap data (Nastasi & Borja, 2016; exemplar quotes derived from unpublished raw data).

Ecomap findings. Borja and colleagues (2017) identified salient support themes for children and adolescents aged 4-19 using the ecomap data from the PPWBG project. The analysis indicated that most themes had low to minimal levels of convergence across the sites, suggesting that some themes were not particularly salient cross-culturally. However, a few themes showed higher levels of convergence: participants at 75% or more of the sites discussed support themes around receiving affection, positive treatment from supportive peers and adults, and receiving help. Participants at 50% to 74% of the sites mentioned advice and guidance, receiving material support, recreational activities, interpersonal interactions, love and nurturance as sources of support. Participants at 25% or less of the sites (which includes site-specific themes, where only one or two sites mention theme) encompassed asking for permission, limitations, and providing encouragement and help. Cultural and contextual factors were surmised to play a role in the sources of support available for the children.

Present Research Analysis

The present study is a part of a multi-method study, where the primary goal was to identify salient themes that are reflected in both data sources, as well as enhance the credibility and reliability of previous information on primary school children's perceptions of support (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Saliency of codes refers to the level of agreement of the occurrence of a code across the nine different sites; saliency does not indicate relative frequency, importance or ranking of a code. The two data collection tools yielded two separate data sources; each data source was analyzed for separate codes and themes. Subsequently, the goal of the present study was to identify salient themes that are reflected across the two data sources. The present study extends the ecomap and focus group findings through triangulation of existing support codes across methods (focus group, ecomaps).

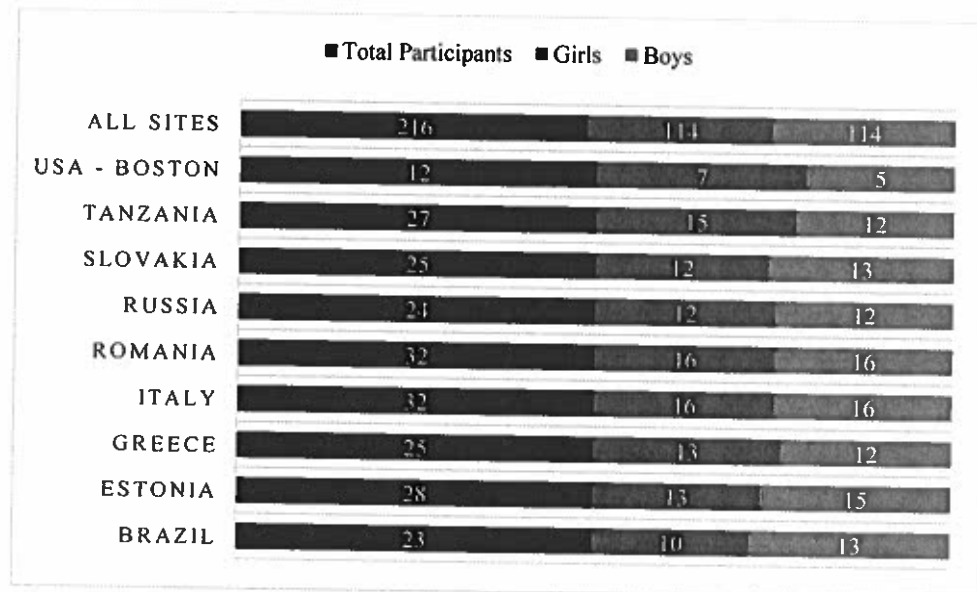
Participants

The present study examined nine of the fourteen original PPWBG sites, and included Brazil, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Tanzania, and USA (Boston site). The inclusion of only nine of the fourteen original sites was based on availability and accessibility of the data; that is, all sites would have needed to submit their translated focus group and ecomap data sources for analysis. The population of focus was students identified as being in Primary or elementary school. Because each site had different criteria for grade admission (based on country standards or laws), the general age range for Primary school children was ages 6 to 12 years old. Figure 1 presents the specific demographic breakdown for sample size, ages, grade levels, and gender for the data analyzed for this study is present below. These figures represent a

subsample of the sample from the PPWBG project (Nastasi & Borja, 2016), and include only those participants for whom both ecomap and focus group data were available.

Figure 1

Demographic breakdown of gender across sites for current study



Adapted from "The Promoting Psychological Well-Being Globally Project" by B.K. Nastasi, and A.P. Borja in B.K. Nastasi and A.P. Borja (Eds.), *International Handbook of Psychological Well-Being in Children and Adolescents: Bridging the Gaps Between Theory, Research and Practice* (p. 16), 2016, New York: Springer. Copyright 2016 by Springer. Adapted with permission.

Triangulation

The triangulation process involved a cross-tabulation of support codes from the ecomap narratives and focus group narratives. The practical choice to use the 51 ecomap codes (derived from original analysis) as the deductive codes for the reanalysis across data sets was recommended by Borja and colleagues (2017), because ecomap codes are more extensive and specific than the focus group codes. Thus, it was expected that use of the larger set of 51 *a priori* codes for re-analysis would provide researchers with more nuanced information on the content of themes reflected in two data sources.

The data analysis process involved 4 steps. First, the 51 *a priori* codes (Table 1) were used to deductively code focus group narratives. Second, the focus group narratives were coded inductively to modify existing codes based on the content of the narratives. Thirdly, the data was reviewed to ensure that the deductive-inductive coding scheme had been applied consistently across data sets and sites. Lastly, the researchers compiled a final list of codes. Ultimately, the triangulation process (using both deductive and inductive coding) was expected to provide researchers with more reliable, and possibly more in-depth, information on how primary school-aged children perceive support and support systems.

Theme Identification

Following the triangulation process, codes were reviewed to identify themes present in the data. In this study, a theme represents higher-level organization of codes, providing a composite or broader meaning to groups of codes (Creswell, 2013). Themes are superordinate to codes, encompassing a set of codes; themes provide meaning and context to a set of codes, while a code represents or exemplifies the overarching content or idea.

Convergence Analysis

Convergence analysis was conducted as a form of pattern analysis to determine patterns across sites. Convergence indicated common occurrence across sites, *rather than* relative frequency, importance or ranking of a theme. Themes with higher levels of convergence were defined as being possibly global, or at least evident cross-culturally across multiple country sites, while lower levels of convergence may be indicative of culture or site-specific phenomena. Derived from Borja and colleagues (2017), levels of

convergence were based on the percentage of sites for which a particular theme was identified, as outlined in Table 3, where: high convergence would be for 75% or more of site agreement for a theme, moderate convergence would be between 50% and 74% site agreement, low convergence would be between 25% and 49%, minimal convergence 25% or less of site agreement, and site-specific would be only one site has mentioned this theme.

Table 3

Levels of convergence

Qualitative Term	Percentage of agreement
High Convergence	75%+ site agreement: 7 or more sites agree
Moderate Convergence	50% to 74% site agreement: 5-6 sites agree
Low Convergence	25% to 49% site agreement: 3-4 sites agree
Minimal Convergence	>25% site agreement: 2 sites agree
Site Specific	Only 1 site has mentioned the theme

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High, moderate and low convergence was organized as a checklist process. The two coders examined how often a code was mentioned, which is saliency; and the coders examined if at least one mention for the particular code or theme endorsed by participants. Convergence was examined at the code-level convergence, and theme-level, where convergence was determined for a code, as well as the theme. At both levels, data was organized by site and gender.

At both the code-level and theme-level, 18 possible endorsements across 33 codes and 5 themes, that is, endorsement by male and female groups across 9 sites. An endorsement was defined as at least one mention for a specific code, thus indicating the relevance of the concept (code/theme) to at least one member of the group. For example, any mention for the code of Material Support would indicate that this code was endorsed. Since Material Support was categorized under the theme Financial/Material Support, this endorsement of the code would indicate that the theme has been endorsed. For both code-level and theme-level convergence, the percentage of convergence for the specific theme and code reflected the percentage of 19 groups (gender by site) endorsing the idea.

Consensus building process. To ensure consistency in application of the code and agreement on and generation of new codes, a consensus building process was used (thus constituting a form of coder agreement/reliability). The consensus building process involved a research team of three individual coders, who were responsible for individual coding tasks throughout the coding processes (e.g., deductive and inductive coding processes), theme identification and convergence analysis. Within both the deductive and inductive coding processes, each coder was responsible for independently coding all narratives and participating in later discussion with the other coders. Each coder was responsible for deductively coding the data using the *a priori* codes. Later, the two coders convened to discuss their coding. Within the discussion, coders looked at individual codes, and presented their rationale for how an individual narrative was related to the code, ultimately coming to an agreement for identified coding scheme. Consensus in the theme identification process involved two coders engaged in a similar process: Coders identified themes independently and subsequently to presenting their rationale to each

other. Consensus was reached when both coders agreed on identification of respective themes. Thus, the final set of codes and themes that are represented in the findings of this study reflected agreement across coders.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to whether the findings are credible and accurate. Nastasi and Borja (2016) posit several dimensions of trustworthiness such as credibility, and confirmability, and corresponding techniques of triangulation, audit trails and external audits to ensure trustworthiness.

Credibility. Credibility refers to the researchers' confidence in the accuracy and truthful representation of the data, similar to internal validity. The analysis included the use of triangulation of multiple data methods to verify previous findings. Using the deductive and inductive coding scheme to verify codes, the triangulation process provided robust, and comprehensive information by comparing the data yielded from the ecomap method and the focus group method.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the integrity of data, particularly indicating neutrality and identifying potential researcher biases in data collection, analysis or research purpose. Audit trails are useful for ensuring that the research process can be examined for potential biases. Audit trails are descriptions and information from the research process, such as the raw data or notes about the research process. The analysis incorporated the use of process notes, where coders wrote their thoughts and rationale on the coding process, theme identification and convergence analysis, as well as documenting codes from the prior analysis.

Measure equivalency. Measure equivalence indicates that a construct is consistently measured across different groups; this is based in the idea that different groups will have different interpretations of a concept, and a measure must consider these potential interpretations from the participants (Knight & Zerr, 2010). Cross-cultural research often must establish measure equivalency, because most measures are translated from one language to another, typically from English to another language. Because the present study used focus group data provided from the cross-cultural Promoting Psychological Well Being Globally (PPWBG) project, it is integral to understand how measure equivalency was reached within the focus group protocol. Flaherty and colleagues (1988, as cited in Harachi et al., 2006; Landrine & Corral, 2014; Mallinckrodt & Wang, 2004) posit that translations of measures go beyond literal translations, requiring content, semantic, technical and conceptual equivalence of the concept. Because the present did not use quantitative measures, functional and scalar equivalence have been replaced with content and technical equivalence.

Content equivalence ensures that the concept being measure is relevant for all cultures involved: for the present study, a systematic literature review has already posited the idea that support, and support systems are a universal concept (Kohout et al., 2013; Shavitt et al., 2016), and thus a relevant concept to the nine countries. Semantic equivalence ensures that each item or instruction on a measure retains its original meaning when translated. Focus group protocols were adapted to a specific country's primary language. As outlined by Nastasi and Borja (2016), semantic equivalence was established through a rigorous translation process, where native speakers of the language were recruited to participate in a back-translation process. Translators were selected by

individual site teams, however the standards required translators to be: (1) native speaker of official language(s) of site, (2) fluent in English, (3) trained and familiar with psychological concepts and theories, and (4) trained to be familiar with study protocols. Selected translators were responsible for taking protocols, and doing a back-translation process, where the protocols are translated to the target language, then translated back into English to ensure correct translation. The use of informed and trained individuals serves to ensure the concepts are grounded in culturally-relevant information and conceptualizations of support.

Technical equivalence (Knight & Zerr, 2010) refers to whether the measure collects similar information across the different cultural groups, meaning the instructions have been correctly translated and make sense. The translated protocols have provided culturally-dependent information on receiving support when faced with stressful, as indicated by the narratives; the narratives were clear responses to the questions around perceived supports and coping mechanisms. At the highest level, conceptual equivalence indicates the concept contains the same meaning across the groups; although the specific context, mode and access of support differs across the sites (which were anticipated, as stated in the research questions), the translated protocols have elicited narratives that indicate support and support systems are integral to primary-school aged children (Nastasi & Borja, 2016).

Results

Summary

The analysis examined how primary school-aged children perceive and conceptualize their support systems within their own cultural context, and how conceptualizations vary across different cultural contexts. Culture-specific conceptualizations of support systems were identified by the children's narratives, providing specific information on the content of support. Conceptualizations of support and the potential variance across different cultural contexts was determined by the level of convergence of a theme. In order to determine saliency of the codes and themes, level of convergence determined by the participants' endorsement of a theme, which was organized by site. Of the original 51 *a priori* codes from ecomap data (Borja, Nastasi, & Sarkar, 2017), only 33 codes about support were found to be salient, meaning they were endorsed by at least one participant across the nine sites.

The 33 salient support codes became the final list of codes to represent contextually-driven content around support and support systems across the two data collection instruments, focus groups and ecomaps. Coders identified five (5) distinct themes that encompassed the 33 salient support codes: (1) Financial/Material Support (included 3 of 33 codes), (2) Emotional Support (9 codes), (3) Social Support (10 codes), (4) Recreational Activities (7 codes), and (5) Academic Support (4 codes). Four of the five themes had high levels of convergence, indicating 75% or more sites endorsed these themes as supports: Financial/Material Support (100% of sites), Emotional Support

(100%), Social Support (94%) and Recreational Activities (89%). Academic Support received low levels of convergence, where only 44% of participants across the different sites endorsed this theme as a support. The following subsections further discuss specific results for the themes.

High Convergence Themes

In examining the overall definition of a theme, researchers focused on themes (and their corresponding codes) that had high (75%+ of sites) or moderate (50%+ of sites) convergence. Themes and codes with high and moderate-level convergence indicate high to moderate saliency, indicating that the contained narratives may represent and define the theme.

Financial/Material support.

Financial/Material Support encompassed three codes: *Material Support* (100%), *"Does what I want"* (17%) and *Makes Sacrifices/Goes out of way for the child* (6%). The narratives associated with this theme indicated the following process: an adult or peer procuring a desired item for the child, which then generated a sense of happiness in receiving the item. A boy from Brazil outlined this process, stating a scenario in which a child his age would experience happiness as "...a son ask[ing] his mom to buy him a toy and she buys clothes for him". Another boy from Brazil notes that he "...feels happy when [my] grandma sends me a toy"; similarly, a girl from Greece shares similar sentiments of joy, noting that "when someone gives you a present and you feel happy".

Another common narrative focused on having others purchasing items for them: a girl from Estonia stated that a response to feeling sadness, would be to "buy something nice." Generally, the salient items are toys and clothes, however other items were

mentioned: a girl from Tanzania mentioned “buying clothes”, a girl from Russia mentioned “chocolate and gifts”, while boys and girls in Italy mentioned vacations, or “a trip.”

Emotional support.

The theme of Emotional Support encompassed 9 support codes, including the following codes and their level of convergence: *Providing Emotional Support* (67%), *Love/Affection* (56%), *Providing Nurturance/Care/Protection* (50%), *Providing Empathy* (44%), *Cooperative/Non-Aggressive Relationship/Treatment by Others* (33%), *Receiving Emotional Support* (22%), *Receiving Nurturance/Care/Protection* (22%), *Receiving Empathy/Understanding* (11%), and *Having a “Deep Connection” or “Emotional Bond”* (11%). Within this theme, the codes *Providing Emotional Support* and *Love/Affection* had the two highest levels of convergence, indicating that the content of these codes are particularly salient, with 67% and 56% convergence, respectively; and thus, may represent the meaning of Emotional Support. The 9 other codes received lower levels of convergence, indicating that the content of these codes may be less salient when defining emotional support. The code, *Having a “Deep Connection”/“Emotional Bond”*, was the only site-specific code, with boys and girls from Italy endorsing it. A more detailed description of the identified codes follows.

Providing Emotional Support narratives revolved around providing sympathy and empathy through various actions. When asked about ideal supports for dealing with sadness, children reported using humor (“We cheer him up with a joke,” stated by a girl from Slovakia), appropriate physical affection (“Cuddle, kiss [them],” stated by a boy from Slovakia), and talking with the individual about the problem (“...if they are sad, talk

to them”, stated by a boy from Brazil). Also, children made more general references to emotional support without specificity, indicating that general support is needed, and depends on the individual child’s circumstance. For example, a boy from Greece noted that an ideal support would “...be there for him and do something...so that he forgets what he is thinking [about]”.

Love/Affection narratives mentioned nonromantic love in the context of peer and family relationships. For example, a girl from Tanzania denoted Love/Affection as being “mutual love with friends” and a girl from Greece indicated that “Parents offer us love, [and] support us,” indicating that relationship with peers and parents are salient. Physical affection is also characterized as a component of Love/Affection, where children indicate touching, caressing (“Caressing him,” stated by boys and girls from Romania), kissing and hugging as normative displays of support. Boys and girls from Italy were the only group to mention Love/Affection in the context of heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships, where children from this country noted that “Love...is when a girl or a boy likes somebody.” Furthermore, they state that love explicitly leads to marriage and children, indicating that “...if a man & a woman love each other, then they get married.” Boys and girls from Italy were also the only site to endorse the code *Having a “Deep Connection” or “Emotional Bond”*: the children described the code in the context of romantic love, and heterosexual romantic relationships, stating that it is similar to “love... [and then] you get together after a long time.”

Social support.

The theme of Social Support encompassed 10 support codes and their accompanying level of convergence: *Advice/Guidance* (61%), *Characteristics of Person*,

Place, or Thing (28%), Companionship (22%), Consistency/Trustworthiness (11%), Cooperative/Non-Aggressive Relationship/Treatment by Others (28%), Engages in Prosocial/Desirable Behaviors with Others (6%), Friendship/Membership in Peer Group (11%), Having an Open/Honest Relationship (6%), Knowing/Living with Someone/Someplace/Something for a Long Time (6%), and Talking/Listening (33%). The codes *Advice/Guidance* and *Talking/Listening* demonstrated the highest levels of convergence within this theme, with moderate levels of convergence for *Advice/Guidance* and low levels for *Talking/Listening*. The other 8 codes demonstrated minimal to site-specific levels of convergence. Site-specific endorsement included: *Consistency/Trustworthiness* for children from Greece, and *Having an Open/Honest Relationship* for girls from Russia.

Advice/Guidance narratives focused on providing or receiving advice from trusted individuals. The action of being able to express potential problems and receive advice was discussed as being able to tell problems ("Tell my problems", stated by a girl from Russia), and asking for help ("Ask for [their] help", stated by a girl from Tanzania). Parents and trusted peers are identified as potential sources of helpful advice; for example, a girl from Estonia noted that when faced with a stressful situation, she would "talk to parents". The code *Talking/Listening* had similar content; for example, children addressed being able to talk to trusted figures, without specifying whether this was seeking advice or guidance.

Recreational activities.

The theme of Recreational Activities encompassed 7 support codes, including the following codes: "*Going Out (Together)*" (39%), "*Having a Good Time Together*"

(28%), *Help to Engage in Recreation/Activity* (17%), *Holiday/Celebration* (11%), *Play/Sport* (83%), *Recreation/Activity – Other* (78%) and *Sharing Similar Interests/Qualities* (11%). The codes *Play/Sport* and *Recreation/Activity-Other* had the highest levels of convergence, both having High levels of convergence. The five other codes had low to minimal levels of convergence; there were no site-specific endorsements.

Play/Sport had high levels of convergence with 78% of sites agreeing. The code explicitly indicated playing as a physical activity; however, there was little content for what kind of play children are engaging in. Narratives often revolved around “playing games” (stated by a boy from Greece), often with peers and friends (“Playing with neighbors,” stated by a girl from Tanzania). *Recreation/Activity – Other* keyed in on other activities that do not necessarily include playing or physical activity: this included reading, playing video games, or watching TV. Although the 5 other codes represented lower levels of convergence, they offer some content to how Recreational Activities can be defined. For example, the code “Going Out (Together)” encompassed narratives around various activities that included being in public spaces with friends or family.

Low Convergence Themes

The analysis yielded themes and codes that a few (>50%) sites found to be salient, relating to academics as a source of support. Although researchers focused on themes and corresponding codes that were deemed more salient, low convergence items demonstrated some perceptions and narratives around academics, which may indicate site-specific conceptualizations of support. In addition, the assumption is that at least one mention reflects potential relevance to the population that requires further investigation.

Academic support. The theme of Academic Support encompassed 4 support codes: *Being Taught (Well)*, *Learning/Studying/Practicing*, *Providing Academic/Instructional Help*, *Receiving Academic/Instructional Help*. With Low levels of convergence, it is not an anomaly that the convergence levels for individual codes were also low (>50%), minimal (>25%), or specific to a few sites. Receiving Academic/Instructional Help had the highest levels of convergence, indicating Low levels of convergence among the sites. The narratives associated with this code discussed receiving help with academics (“I get help from other teachers”, stated by a girl from Estonia), particularly with homework. Alternatively, some children indicated that receiving a quality education served as a support (“To be taught well”, stated by a boy from Tanzania). With such low convergence, the theme was only endorsed by: boys from Tanzania, girls from Brazil, Estonia, and Greece, and both genders in Romania.

Summary

The analysis yielded robust information on how children conceptualize various sources of support, and how these conceptualizations vary across the different sites. Across the different codes and themes, the narratives illustrated context-specific conceptualizations of support, providing researchers with information on how primary school-aged children define their support systems in light of their cultural context. From the narratives, the convergence analysis helped to critically understand the prevalence of these different forms of support, demonstrating that some forms of support were present in most of the sites. Many of the narratives from different sites were noticeably similar; using the methodology, researchers were able to examine if these associated narratives, codes and themes were present across the sites. The findings suggest that many of these

codes and themes are present across the different sites: some codes and themes being specific to one site, while other codes and themes were mentioned across all or almost all of the sites, representing varying levels of convergence.

Discussion

Summary

The purpose of the analysis was to identify potential themes and definitions around support systems, and examine whether these themes are global, or context-specific. The research was guided by two research questions, centered on how primary school-aged children perceive and conceptualize their support systems within their own cultural context, and how those conceptualizations may vary across different cultural contexts. Five distinct major themes were found across the nine different sites.

Emotional support and social support.

Emotional and Social Support both had high levels (75%+) of convergence, indicating that these themes may be global, and present across different cultures. The associated narratives reveal that children feel most supported when provided with emotional and physical displays of love, affection, and empathy. The narratives associated with the theme aligns with both previous findings and existing research. Borja and colleagues (2016, 2017) both found themes associated with Emotional and Social Support to be relatively salient, where participants at 50% or more of sites mentioned themes associated with Emotional and Social Support. Emotional/Social Support is one of the primary forms support; it is common and stable across different cultures (Taylor et al., 2004). The associated narratives reveal how these supports make children feel, yielding positive feelings of love, happiness and connectedness: the content of the narratives illustrate both emotional and social support as the ability to improve a child's

current emotional state, supply feelings of care and nurturance, and provide advice (Taylor et al., 2004). These results are reflective of current research on support, where emotional and social support systems provide positive feelings that boost the child's well-being, contributing to feelings of trust, validation, connectedness and belonging (Cohen & Willis, 1985).

Although results support existing research that function, and outcomes associated with Emotional/Social Supports are similar across cultures, the current analysis goes further in seeking context-specific definitions of emotional and social support. With such high levels of convergence, the themes Emotional and Social Support had narratives that indicated some cross-cultural agreement on the definition of Emotional Support—for example, 56% of sites endorsed “Love/Affection,” defining this code as love between friends and family. However, the primary implication of the current analysis is that culturally-bound, and context-specific definitions are integral to research, instead of using *a priori* definitions. An example of the importance of using context-specific definitions can be found in the case of participants from the Italy site.

Italian children were the only participants to define the code “Love/Affection” in terms that may be defined as non-platonic, romantic love: the associated narratives from the children detailed heterosexual romantic/passionate relationships as a conceptualization of “love.” While this may seem to be an anomaly compared to the other eight sites that used language to define love as nonromantic, the purpose of the cross-cultural analysis was to explore possibly different conceptualizations of support that are dependent on culture and context. This context-specific conceptualization of “Love/Affection” may be credited to context and culture-specific beliefs, values

associated with love. Equally, it is important to understand that while the language used by children may initially appear to be romantic concepts, the meaning of the language may be associated with language socialization from the culture; for example, Italians may use language associated with romantic love very similarly to how others speak of platonic relationships. However, future research needs to investigate developmentally specific uses of language expression before concrete recommendations can be made. Ultimately, these results underscore the importance of investigating for possible cross-cultural differences in the content and definition of Emotional and Social Support.

Financial/material support.

The theme Financial/Material Support also had high convergence (participants at 100% of the sites endorsed the theme), indicating a theme that may be present across different cultures. From the associated narratives, the content within this theme are clear: children feel supported when receiving consumer material items, such as gifts, clothes, technology, toys, or money. These results support previous research, where Borja and colleagues (2016, 2017) found codes associated with financial and material support to be highly salient (student narratives at 75% or more of sites mentioned these themes); Taylor and colleagues (2004) list financial/material assistance as one of the primary, and common forms of support, possessing the ability to provide a barrier between the child and stressor (McKay & Willis, 1985). With all nine sites endorsing narratives associated with financial and material support, the relative importance of financial and material assistance from individuals may be connected to larger, global themes of consumerism and capitalism, known as global consumer culture (Cleveland, Laroche, & Hallab, 2010).

Global consumer culture (GCC) is credited to technological advances in international access to media, thoughts, ideas and people. Social historians and economists have characterized GCC as a global inundation of capitalist ideals, characterizing it as sentiments found within the narratives occurring due to "...growing allurements of available cash and the growing exposure to western habits and pastimes..." (Fass, 2003, p. 970). Globalization has created a larger demand, as more people have increased access to goods and resources that have often been accessible for nationals of industrialized nations. Fass (2003) sheds light on this perspective that "...the children caught in the new forces of globalization will...ask why they should not participate in the pleasures that their earnings could provide... [such as]...[a] visit [to] McDonalds, buy tapes and CDs, and dress in the hippest Western clothing" (p. 970). Ultimately, the narratives do not reveal participants' motivation for wanting or even conceptualizing gifts and rewards as support. The narratives from the analysis only reveal feelings of support in receiving material, consumer items, and possible conceptualizations of financial support could be investigated in future research.

Recreational activities.

The last theme to receive high levels of convergence was Recreational Activities (89%), indicating the possible emergence of a global theme. The associated narratives for Recreational Activities were centered on physical activity and entertainment (as present in the support code "Play"), with the function that "play" provided feelings of physical and emotional well-being, as well as connectedness with others. The high salience of play and activities may be related to the participants' developmental age, as well as

sociocultural transitions in the conceptualizations of childhood, supporting existing research.

Play is one of the most ubiquitous features of childhood: IPA Declaration of the Child's Right to Play (1979) in conjunction with the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) both articulate that children across all cultures and time periods have participated in play, demonstrating that playing is an "instinctive, natural and spontaneous" activity that children do. Play has been well-documented as a fundamental need for children, specifically in early childhood, where playing with self and others promotes early interpersonal skills, social competency, language development and problem-solving skills (Kessel, 2018). In examining the ecomap and focus group data separately, both Borja and colleagues (2016, 2017) found themes associated with playing to be relatively salient, where participants at 50% or more of sites mentioned it. Despite globalization, Fass (2003) also points out that the concept of play and recreation have only recently evolved in our global consumer culture; in many developing, newly industrialized countries, children may still be expected to work and contribute to household finances. However, the narratives support claims that play is important and ubiquitous: across the nine different sites – all possessing different statuses as industrialized or newly industrialized nations, playing was salient for all children. Ultimately, this suggests and further supports literature that proposes play is an integral component of enhancing psychological well-being for children, particularly for school-aged children, and should be considered when conceptualizing support.

Academic support.

The theme Academic Support showed the lowest level of convergence (44%, Low Convergence). Specifically, the participants who endorsed Academic Support were boys and girls from Romania, boys from Tanzania, and girls from Brazil, Estonia, and Greece. Academic Support, as described by participants, referred to feeling supported when participating in activities that lead to academic achievement: this could be in receiving help with academics, whether through homework help or advancing their education. The associated narratives support existing research that instructive support (e.g., help) is a common source of support. However, existing research for the association on academic achievement is largely mired in Western perspectives, or comparisons between specific cultures. Culture-specific perceptions and values may provide an explanation for the salience of Academic Support, and would require further study to understand the link between support and academic achievement for children within these specific sites.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations

Considering developmental capacity of participants.

A barrier within research lays within traditional research assumptions, where children are perceived as being inappropriate participants in research; the assumption being that children lack the developmental capacity to understand and formulate answers to abstract concepts – such as support-- that are often presented in qualitative research, presenting them as invalid sources of information (Claverling and McLaughlin, 2010; Curin, 2001; Nastasi, 2014). Since the current study focused on using young student voices to understand the concept of support, there are some considerations for the capacity that young children possess to concretely answer questions around support as a more abstract concept.

While existing literature supports the idea that typical development in abstract thinking and language do coincide with age and bioneuropsychological maturation, Curin (2001) points out that most developmental patterns support elementary school students' capacity to be reliable sources of information: young children (>7 years old) exhibit higher accuracy in recounting salient life experiences, and possess the vocabulary to accurately discuss the present. First and second graders (ages 7-8) demonstrate more advances in accurately describing the past, and describing and discriminating feelings and emotions associated with past events; by the time children reach the fourth grade (ages 9-10), their ability to recount stories is similar to adults' capacity (Curin, 2001).

Considering the possible limitations presented by development, advocates of the child rights perspective have also identified adaptations to qualitative methodology that is supportive of children's capacity and competence. In terms of the methodology for utilizing children voices, Curin (2001) suggests a few methods for working with elementary school-aged participants, as follows: (a) inclusion of visual components and aids, such as drawings or pictures to help explain abstract concepts, (b) place child as the expert by having them establish definitions of concepts and terms based off participants' understanding or usage, (c) using open ended questions as frequently as possible, and (d) being flexible with breaks, further probing questions and tailoring the experience for the individual child or children.

The *PPWBG* project (Nastasi & Borja, 2016) detailed the extensive methodology that was used elicit appropriate student responses, using ecomaps and focus group protocol as tools to ensure that student-participants were able to understand the concept of support. As a tool, the ecomap tool provided student-participants with the opportunity to use a visual aid, by physically drawing and mapping out their salient relationship (Curin, 2001; Nastasi & Borja, 2016). Within this activity, the student-participants were placed as the 'expert' on their own relationships; they were provided with the opportunity to label and appraise the relationship, as well as use their own voice to recount a story demonstrating the relationship. The focus group protocol student-participants placed the student-participants as 'experts', using them as the source for conceptualizing feelings associated with support (and stressors). Through using the students' language and conceptualization of feelings associated with support, the researchers helped to ensure that the students were able to make more abstract connections with supports when

presented with stressful scenarios. Ultimately, the project took steps to ensure that younger participants were able to understand the concept of support, and accurately describe it from their perception.

Use of a phenomenological framework.

The present analysis aimed to examine context-specific definitions of support systems, using the voices of children from within their own cultural context to define these concepts. One of the goals of the analysis was to limit, and possibly eliminate, researcher biases and assumptions. Using a phenomenological framework (Creswell, 2013), the researchers participating in the analysis sought to use the participants' interpretation of support to provide meaning to support systems. While the phenomenological framework was used to guide the research, there may be a limitation in having a researcher who is outside of many of the cultures providing some interpretation to the narrative data. Although trustworthiness and measure equivalency were used to ensure that the data was collected in a culturally-sensitive way, the interpretation and analysis still used researchers who are outside of the culture of examined sites. Future research should address this limitation by ensuring that researchers are also cultural brokers (PCSIM; Nastasi, Varjas & Moore, 2004), via being (a) a part of the culture and context of the specific site, or (b) a professional with formal training on sociocultural and sociopolitical history and context of the site (e.g., historian).

Implications for Research and Practice

In the context of our increasingly globalized, multicultural society, it has become imperative to understand the values and needs associated with support systems. Future directions for research should focus on addressing methodological concerns and filling

the gap in literature, while potential directions in applied practice lead towards considering safety and supports in schools.

Implications for further research and addressing research limitations.

Considering the impact of age on responses. As addressed in the limitations, developmental capacity and age may impact the responses around support. In considering age, researchers may see a shift in some of the themes associated with younger elementary school aged children, versus older students. Since the analyzed data from the study examined children aged approximately 6 to 12, future research directions could focus on separately examining responses from older and younger students, looking for different salient themes that may be associated with age, maturity and developmental capacity, in the context of the child's lived experience within their culture. Within the scope of the current research, age was not considered when looking at the narratives, where narratives were only filtered based on site and gender. Although the researchers can often deduce the age of the participants based on the complexity of the wording in the narratives (e.g., "we play alot" vs. "my friends and I play together pretty often"), future research would require returning to the data set to triangulate and analyze for themes based on age group as well.

Examining relationship between types of support and types of stressors. Within the data collection tools, all student-participants provided narratives around support from the context as a buffer against stress. Particularly, the students were presented with various stressful scenarios and asked to think of supports that alleviate the stress. Since the current analysis focused on all narratives of support (regardless of the associated stressor eliciting the support), future research could focus on examining the potential

relationship between the supports and the associated stressors. Using the data from the *PPWBG* (Nastasi & Borja, 2016) and including other future research implications, future research could use mixed-methodology to dually (a) find themes of support associated with a particular stressful situation (as a proxy for a stressor) by country, gender, and age group, and (b) establish a relationship between identified support themes and stressor.

Continued inclusion of children's voices to define support. As addressed in the limitations, researchers must continue to use children's voices (as their own cultural experts) to guide further understanding of why or how the compiled themes are salient for individuals within a culture. In order to understand the saliency, researchers can complete an ethnography of the particular concept with cultural experts, as well as involve children's perspectives through targeted focus groups aimed at discussing particular themes (e.g., questions around academic support). For example, a truly phenomenological and participatory framework would have participants working dually as the researchers, providing context for their own narratives. In working with primary-school aged children, this could be simply tailoring additional focus groups with questions that focus on concepts that arose in previous focus groups. For example, for the Italian site, future research could be asking the children about their definition of love and how they have defined it. Generally, further ethnography could provide context for the larger sociocultural values that may influence children's' perceptions of support. This point is important even though the process of trustworthiness included persistent observation. Researchers must continue these qualitative methods and, perhaps expand them to include both ethnography and persistent observations. In terms of bridging the gap in research, existing research often only focuses on the importance of support

systems, but not necessarily the specific content of support systems. Attempts to identify the composition of support and support systems in research have either not examined cross-cultural ideals or included children's own perspectives, without *a priori* assumptions from researchers. Understanding associated cultural values and needs for support systems requires children's voices to identifying the potential supports, and also identify the potential globalist of these supports.

Implications for applied practice.

From ensuring our research has accurately represented children's voices, the implications for practice become a more prominent conversation about the supports that we can offer children in schools, within the scope of the specific local and national context. Existing beliefs from our evidence-base demonstrates that supports are important to children's psychological well-being: school psychologists understand that children need support that is positive and beneficial to their well-being. However, many psychologists may base this understanding of needs and supports around their own perspective of support; although a psychologist may actively practice understanding cultural nuances, it is still possible to bypass culture and context-specific supports and needs of children. This may become especially important when working with elementary-school aged children, who are often not presented with the authority to speak on their own needs. For example, psychologists may get an interpretation of child's needs from teachers, or parents, instead of the child directly.

The present study supports the existing research that support is a universal concept; however, the analysis uniquely adds in the narrative that the voice of children within their cultural context needs to be supported in defining these concepts. Within

applied settings, the definition children provide from their own contextual experiences may change how school psychologists are able to provide supports, or procure supports from other resources. Within a school environment, this could be as simple as a psychologist asking clients to define how they feel supported, to school-wide studies to measure perceptions of support and available support (Safe Schools NOLA, 2018). Ultimately, the outcomes would yield research that is more culturally sensitive and tailored to acknowledging differences that are beneficial for positive outcomes in practice.

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