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A preadolescents' self-perceived stressor inventory: Development and initial findings

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Pace University, 1986

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A PREADOLESCENTS' SELF-PERCEIVED STRESSOR INVENTORY: DEVELOPMENT AND INITIAL FINDINGS

by

Elaine M. Jorgensen

A Doctoral Project Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at Pace University

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1986

PACE UNIVERSITY

PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT
PSY.D. PROJECT
FINAL APPROVAL FORM

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I have read the final version of the doctoral project and certify that it meets the relevant requirements for the Psy.D. degree in School-Community Psychology.

John J. Mitchell — August 29, 1986
(Project Advisor's Signature) (Date)

Paul E. Echandia — Sept. 4, 1986
(Project Consultant's Signature) (Date)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

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ABSTRACT

Many children who have adjustment problems may be showing extreme responses to stress; therefore, there is a need to identify these children so that the necessary support to cope with the stressors can be provided. A search of the literature, however, revealed that the importance of studying childhood stressors and their impact on children has not received the attention it deserves. This is emphasized by the fact that the first reported children's stressor inventory was developed by Coddington as recently as 1972 and in the subsequent 14 years, relatively few researchers have focused on this critical area.

The current project produced a preadolescents' self-report stressor inventory that evaluates an individual's perception of 68 life events. The Preadolescents' Self-Perceived Stressor Inventory (PSSI) was developed from a pool of 385 potential events that were generated and then evaluated for inclusion by preadolescents, parents, and professionals. A stringent multiple cutoff criterion was applied to reduce the 385 events to the 68 included on the inventory. Thirty-nine of these 68 events are unique to the PSSI. These newly included events underscore the importance of incorporating children's perceptions in the development phases of a self-report inventory. A multidimensional scoring system that yields an uptightness, experience, preoccupation, and stress index score was developed.

The PSSI was administered to 400 preadolescents. Thirteen principal components were extracted from the inventory and factor scores were generated for each. Results of ANOVA's using these scores revealed that in general neither grade nor gender influenced children's perception of the stress engendered by the events.

Data regarding the occurrence of childhood stressors, the perceived severity of the events, and the factors underlying the events provide insight into childhood stressors. The PSSI is suggested for use as a group screening instrument, a structured interview, a component in a psychological battery, and a tool in psychotherapy.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale for Studying Stress in Children

Many children who have adjustment problems may be showing extreme responses to stress. There is a need to identify these children so that they can be provided with the necessary support to cope with the stress. Although all children will experience events that are stressful, some will experience a greater number of stressful events or will have more difficulty adjusting to them. If a child's coping resources become unduly strained, his/her adjustment to the stressor may not be merely ineffective but even be counterproductive. This may eventually lead to the development of emotional and/or behavioral problems that are secondary to having been under intense stress.

Without methods of early identification of children under stress, they will continue to struggle to cope on their own until their systems are so taxed that they begin to manifest symptoms of emotional strain. Even though the American Psychiatric Association in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (APA, 1980) specifically requires the identification of recent life stressors and an estimate of their impact as part of the five axis diagnostic procedure, none of the instruments generally in use is designed to identify life stressors that may be affecting a child's well-being.

It would, therefore, be important to develop screening tools that can comprehensively and effectively quantify the impact of life stressors on children of various age groups. Both the events that are potential stressors in children's lives and the child's self-perception of the various events must be considered. Antonovsky (1974) has emphasized that "if anything has been learned in the study of stressful life events, it is that what is important for the consequences is the subjective perception of the meaning of the event rather than its objective character" (p. 246). This concept, however, has been sorely overlooked by many of the researchers who have investigated the impact of stressors. Beyond assessing individuals' perceptions of the stress engendered by particular events, it will be crucial to establish norms in order to have a point of comparison.

Early identification of children at risk has been encouraged so that early interventions can be used to prevent likely problems and/or to diminish those that already exist.

Anthony (1974) suggested that maladaptive school behavior is closely interrelated with the experiencing of stressful life events, and a number of subsequent studies have supported this contention. For instance, Sandler and Block (1979) found that students identified as having adjustment problems had experienced more recent stress at home than had well adjusted students. Chandler and Hoesch (1982) found that children referred for intervention services

had experienced more recent stress than non-referred children. Other researchers (Dunn, 1982; Gersten, Langner, Eisenberg & Orzeck, 1974) found that scores on a life events stressor inventory positively correlated with scores on several measures of behavioral maladjustment. In addition, one study (Heisel, Ream, Raitz, Rappaport & Coddington, 1973) revealed that children from four patient groups had experienced more frequent and/or more severe life event stressors prior to the onset of their illnesses than had their healthy peers in the same period.

Many studies, as noted above, support the notion that stress in children may take its toll on their emotional and physical well being. Furthermore, this research suggests there is a critical need to be sensitive to the impact that stressors can have on children so that it can be ameliorated whenever possible to avoid potentially negative consequences.

The work of several researchers, Appley and Trumbell (1967), Sandler (1980), and Thomas, Chess and Birch (1968) among others, suggests that there are a number of factors that may moderate the impact of stressors. Appley and Trumbell, and Thomas, Chess and Birch discuss the relation between stress and individual vulnerability, noting that behavioral style and personal history can function to exacerbate or diminish the impact of any given stressful life events. Sandler (1980) investigated social support resources as moderators of the relationship between stress and

maladjustment. He found that having older siblings and having two parents in the family both reduce the negative effects of stress on children. There is a compelling need to explore further the factors which may moderate the impact of childhood stressors; but before this can be adequately done, there is need for the development of improved methods of quantifying stress in children.

The Origin of Life Events Inventories

The investigation of the impact of stress originated within the biological sciences with the work of Cannon, Selye, Meyer, and Wolff among others. Their work established a definite relationship between emotional stress and physiological dysfunction.

Cannon (1929) made the earliest systematic investigation of the effects of stress. He made detailed observations of the bodily changes related to pain, hunger, and the major emotions and concluded that a potentially pathogenic relationship exists between emotional arousal and bodily changes.

Selye (1936, 1946, 1956) greatly expanded upon the concept of stress and its potentially debilitating effects upon the body's physiology. He used a very broad definition of stress, noting that it results from any demand made upon the body; therefore, a variety of dissimilar situations or events, whether they be positive or negative, could be capable of inducing stress. These potential stress inducers

have come to be called stressors.

Meyer (1951), beginning in the 1930's, furthered the concept of stressors to include a broad range of typically experienced life events. He advocated using life charts which provided a unique demonstration of the influence of biological, psychological and sociological phenomena upon health and disease in people.

Research conducted in Harold G. Wolff's laboratory suggested that stressful life events, by evoking psychophysiological reactions, can play a causative role in disease development (Holmes, Goodell, Wolf & Wolff, 1950; Wolff, Wolf & Hare, 1950).

Building upon this previous research, subsequent work (Rahe, Meyer, Smith, Kjaer & Holmes, 1964) established that a variety of life events which necessitate readjustment significantly relate to illness onset. This work claimed that readjustment required by the life events strains the adaptive capacities of the body's physiological system, thereby, lowering one's resistance to illness. Holmes and Rahe (1967) then took the next step of developing an inventory to quantify the amount of readjustment required by specific life events. This, they thought, would provide an index which could predict the onset of illness. Likewise, if the negative effects of these stressors could be modulated, perhaps the onset of illness could be prevented, or the severity of the illness could be lessened.

Finally, since the development of methods to quantify the impact of life event stressors, many studies using adult subjects provide further evidence that a relationship exists between life stress and minor as well as chronic physical illnesses (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Rahe, 1968; Rahe & Lind, 1971; Theorell & Rahe, 1971; Wyler, Masuda & Holmes, 1971).

At the same time, other researchers (Dekker & Webb, 1974; Markush and Favero, 1974; Paykel, Meyers, Dienelt, Klerman, Lindenthal & Pepper, 1969; Vinokur & Selzer, 1975) began to explore the relationship between life events and psychiatric symptomology.

The Development of Life Events Inventories

The first life events stressor inventories were designed for application with adults. The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967) has served as the paradigm for many of the adult stressor inventories subsequently created, despite its having received methodological criticisms. The SRRS also functioned as the basis for the first stressor inventory for children, which was developed by Coddington (1972). Although Coddington's inventory also received criticisms, it served as the springboard to the development of many of the inventories (Chandler, 1981; Monoghan, Robinson & Dodge, 1979; Sandler & Block, 1979) designed to investigate stress in children. It was recognized that these attempts to quantify stress in

children were limited by the methodologies employed by the researchers.

A significant shift occurred with the work of Yeaworth, York, Hussey, Ingle and Goodwin (1980), Yamamoto (1979), and Dunn (1982), who for the first time made use of the importance of a child's own perceptions of the impact of stressors. The work of Yamamoto and Felsenthal (1982) and Dunn (1982) clearly demonstrates that children and adults differentially perceive the impact of stressors, thus indicating that earlier studies which used adult perceptions had a serious methodological flaw. Dunn also demonstrated that children as young as age four can differentiate the degree of impact created by various life events. It was shown, however, that children were unable to respond to the inventories using Holmes and Rahe's original social readjustment methodology (Yeaworth et al., 1980) so new scoring techniques that can be appropriately applied with children were developed.

A further change occurred when Yamamoto (1979) and Dunn (1982) also responded to the developmental issues of children by designing their scales to be appropriate for narrower age ranges of children than had the previous researchers. In addition, Dunn demonstrated the importance of employing comprehensive techniques for item generation. None of the researchers, however, included children's input in the selection of inventory items.

Attempts to Quantify Stressors and Measure Stress in Adults

Based on the work of Rahe et al. (1964), Holmes and Rahe (1967) developed the first reported paper and pencil inventory, the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS), designed to quantify the amount of readjustment required by 43 presumably common life events. (See Holmes and Rahe, 1967, for the 43 item Social Readjustment Rating Scale.)

Although this initial attempt by Holmes and Rahe to quantify stressors and measure stress has become the paradigm for many subsequent life events scales, three major criticisms of their methodology have arisen.

In order to facilitate an understanding of these criticisms a brief description of Holmes and Rahe's procedures is presented. The 43 items included on the scale were empirically derived from the authors' previous clinical experience, from the earlier noted work of Meyer, and from a review of medical records. Social readjustment was defined as a measure of the "intensity and length of time necessary to accommodate to a life event, regardless of the desirability of this event" (Holmes & Rahe, 1967, p. 213). Three hundred and ninety-four respondents were requested to estimate the average (rather than one's personal) degree of readjustment necessitated by each event by comparing each event to Event 1, "Marriage", which was assigned an arbitrary value of 500. Proportionately larger or smaller numbers were