Stress and Educational Expectations: A Study of Future Orientation

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Abstract

This research explores the extent to which the type of secondary education a student receives impacts their perceived stress level when it comes to thinking about college. Drawing from pace-of-life literature in educational and work-sphere studies, this research also explores whether the pace-of-life in educational institutions contributes to this perceived mental stress. This is a qualitative research project consisting of interviews with public school and alternative school (charter or home) students. Particular focus is given toward school norms on future-oriented pressures and whether the school provides leniency to lower performing students. Three theories were used for synthesis: structural strain theory, social learning theory, and fear appeal theory. This article argues that parents are most influential on a student's perceived stress level in relation to future goals. The information collected from this study can inform school and parenting resources, and it indicates opportunities for future studies.

Key Words: pace-of-life, stress, education, adolescents

Introduction

This article was motivated by the question of whether stress is detrimental or whether it is, in fact, necessary for optimal motivation and perseverance in students. In other words, does stress make us successful? While there is certainly anecdotal evidence of this many can describe from their own lives, there is also research that shows there are both good (for motivational purposes) and bad (stress which negatively effects mental and physical health) types of stress, and some people may have more bad stress than good stress. Stress can lead to various mental and physical ailments (Gamble, 2013). This research sought to

better understand why students experience stress in regards to their personal time orientation (if someone bases actions and thoughts on perceptions of past, present, or future events). The secondary school a student attended is hypothesized as an important influence on a student's perceived stress level. Specifically, this study asks: Does the type of school and its norms for time orientation affect a student's perceived stress level when considering future goals like attending college? In order to help answer this question, structural strain theory (Merton, 1968), fear appeal theory (Williams, 2010), and social learning theory (Bandura, 1971) are used in conjunction with qualitative interview data.

Literature Review

It seems quite common for U.S citizens to feel a lack of time for leisure or exercise in their busy schedules. U.S. citizens work an average of seven hours a day and allocate five hours of leisure time (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). U.S. society can become consumed by work and productivity that encourages future-orientation, and the stress related to such norms can affect individuals' physical health and mental health (Zimbardo and Stephenson, 2010 and Leveine and Norenzayan, 1999). Levine (1999) found that future-oriented and fast-paced cultures had more risk of heart disease and death. According to Garhammer's (2002) study, the pressure to do a lot of things at once does inflict health problems like sleep deprivation and tiredness. Lack of sleep can contribute to decreased mental and physical health, such as heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and cancer (Gamble, 2013). Despite these potential negative consequences, U.S. society often prioritizes future-orientation.

Future-orientation includes making goals and finding the means to accomplish those goals. A central aspect of the U.S. educational system is to prepare children for the future; it is up to the school to set expectations of students. These expectations are usually future-oriented; they want students to graduate and often to pursue higher education. Blustein et al (2010) reported that urban students saw the need to attend college as vital if they want more options in life. According to a student in the study, high school is merely a basic tool for college, and college perpetuates a career. In prioritizing future-orientation, schools may encourage participation in extracurricular activities, high

grade point averages (GPA), and/or Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Future-oriented expectations from schools can carry on into young adulthood prior to people entering the "real world."

The fast-paced and future-oriented lifestyle of U.S. society may hinder student's academic well–being, and therefore make fast-paced schooling tactics counterproductive (Brown et al., 2011). People can only do so much in a day, and The Slow Movement suggests that humans should balance their time (Garhammer, 2002). Unlike the U.S., some countries in Europe live a present-oriented and slower paced lifestyle, referred to as The Slow Movement. Carlo Petrini started The Slow Movement in Rome as a revolt against globalization and fast-food industries. Resisting the effect of globalization, participants in The Slow Movement began to eat longer meals (Parker, 2008). The Slow Movement can show teachers how to slow down the rapid pace set by technology and globalization, while still giving the students an enriching education through reflection (Badley & Badley, 2011). The learning and coping skills students obtain will influence future work behaviors and future orientation.

Brown, Nobiling, & Birch (2011) found there was a relationship between the amount of homework students have and their parent's busyness. Parents may impact children's time orientation and behaviors in schools, as well as time management. A student may repeatedly see their caretaker's behaviors and mimic them. However, modeling doesn't mean a behavior will remain static.

Garhammer (2002) examined whether a very busy and stressful life leads to a happy life. Generally, people with many commitments can enjoy life, if they have access to leisure activities and have access to stress coping resources (Garhammer, 2002). Students may experience less bad stress and perform better in schools if there is less pressure on future-orientation, or if the schools provide proper coping resources. We need to understand better variation in future-orientation and/or coping resources among schools and associated influences (e.g. parents) with those schools in order to explain the extent to which bad stress and student performance improves. This study attempts to do so by examining how students are influenced by schools and caregivers in relation to time orientation, coping resources given, and stress.

Methods

Participants

This study includes nine open-ended, in depth interviews. Seven participants were undergraduate students from a mid-sized Midwestern university chosen through convenience sampling. Six participants were female and Caucasian, but represented various ages (18 – 27 years old) and came from different types of schools. Three university students previously attended a charter or home school. Four of university students attended public schools. In addition, two students at the secondary school level were interviewed, one went to a charter school and the other went to a public school.

Procedure

Participants read and signed an informed consent form. If participants were minors, a parental or guardian's signature was required before the interview. Each consent form had every IRB requirement explained to them. The participants were asked a series of questions related to stress, school, parents, and time orientation in relation to the student's goals. The researcher jotted notes during each in-person interview. If it was an online interview, the researcher collected typed messages. There were two online interviews. A Microsoft Excel codebook was created for the data analysis.

Participants were numerically labeled by their grade level, the interview number, and a series of random numbers. The undergraduate participants' responses were inductively categorized into different codes: pressures, school's ideal expectations for students, school's realistic expectations for students, college resource availability, college fairs, high school curriculum, handholding (if the school offered alternative schools or academic leniency for lower performing students), and undergraduate student's advice. The two high school level participants were inductively coded separately because they had a different set of interview questions: future plans, discussion of potential futures, amount of college resources, influence of parents' work on students, parents' effect on students, role models, students' time management, students' perception of their school, students' future concerns, and institutional stress. Undergraduate students reflected on their past and how it affected them now. The high school students' questions were

present and future-oriented; however, some students clarified answers by using past examples.

Results

Future Orientation – Advanced Placement Classes and Future Preparation

Those who attended both public and charter schools discussed the availability of AP or other classes which gave students the opportunity to earn college credits before college. The purposes of these classes was to receive college credits in a more cost effective way, place students ahead of others by lessening college credits, and influence a student's GPA before college. For the purpose of this research article, AP classes (and others like them) mark future orientation. Some students reported adequately being prepared for college or "the real world" due to the rigor; however it was not fitting for all students. Regina, a female student who came from a charter school in a high socioeconomic county reported: "I personally think [my charter school] pushed too many lowerclassmen into AP classes that were hard even for upperclassmen; therefore there was an obvious difference in the quality of work of the lowerclassmen students and the upperclassmen students in AP classes."

The quote above exemplifies how that particular school pushed students at different levels to take the AP classes. Since the AP classes indicate future-orientation by the schools, it is to be assumed that this particular school favored future-orientation. When the participant mentioned the "quality of work" from lower classmen, they indicate it to be lower. There are many speculations as to why, but one reason could be that students are trying to balance their schedules between the AP classes and extracurricular activities and do not possess the same developmental level of cognition as upperclassmen. AP classes alone are time consuming due to the amount of outside work, potentially contributing to bad stress or poor achievement.

While some students reported that AP classes can be time consuming, other students reported that some of their AP classes were easy. Some students like the one above, regarded AP classes as a push from schools in regard to college achievement. Participants who cited AP, College Level Examination Program (CLEP), or other college credit granting

programs, sometimes also mentioned how their schools offered "hand-holding." "Hand-holding" refers to schools allowing lower performing students to graduate on time (normally four years). Examples of this include: sending lower performing students or students who exhibit maladaptive behaviors to alternative schools, or allowing grading leniency in classes. One participant pseudo-named Natasha, came from a well-funded public school. She mentioned that if a student did not perform well, the school would provide alternative schools or dismiss late work to ensure graduation: "I knew a guy who did well in school, but he just kinda lost interest in it. He stopped attending classes so he would get detentions and got suspended. After a while, he just got transferred to an alternative school [where] he could graduate."

The student from Natasha's experience may have seen present-orientation as more beneficial for him, rather than the school's future-oriented goals. The alternative school reported above is an indication of compromise in time orientation: an alternative school (that is not a charter school) is used for problematic students or under-performing students, therefore curriculum may be less demanding. This compromise is shown through the slower oriented push for graduation (an item of future-orientation) and the attendance of such students.

Charter schools' modes of teaching are often different than public high schools, regardless of the amount of funding they receive. Charter schools sometimes give more autonomy related to deadlines and topics. Charter schools may also require students to complete more coursework and may use project-based curriculum. Regina attended a well-funded charter school and outlines her school structure below:

> The entire structure of the school acts as an academic bridge between high school and university. Homework is not checked daily (as it isn't in college), research is self-directed (similar to university theses), and many subjects are chosen according to the student's personal interests. University is obviously something they hope for all the students but I felt less focused on getting into a specific university and more focused on cultivating a global perspective.

Additionally, Regina was thankful for the amount of coursework and requirements their charter school required:

> All of us had different life goals and I believe [my charter school] helped us become better versions of ourselves. We had a lot more academic flexibility and we could explore our interests while still maintaining that high school "safety net."… The atmosphere is inspiring and the academic structure nurtured my potential.

However, a participant pseudo-named Sasha, attended a less well-funded charter school expressed concerns towards graduation because of the extra credits her charter school required. She also did not enjoy the autonomic pedagogy:

> In the charter school you need 32 credits to graduate (3,200 hours of work). In the traditional school it's 28 both are way more high in standards than the usual school...I would gladly go back to traditional high school; I hate it here very much. It's super easy to slack and get behind on your credits and the math here is duncical. They say when you're down at the project based learning you get more freedom but, it feels like a Nazi camp. (Sorry, but it's how I feel.)

As illustrated by the previous quotes, the amount of funding a school receives effects students' perceptions of the schools. It affects stress and resources for coping with stressors. Better-funded charter schools have more college visits and guidance counselors. Participants from less-funded charter schools never discussed guidance counselors, and seldom had as many visits from other colleges. Sasha claimed: "My school does not have a lot of those opportunities. When we do have them I enjoy them a lot, it helps me get more insight on what college and adult life will be like." Without the aid of active guidance counselors or other coping resources, students may have more bad stress from the future-oriented expectations instilled from institutions such as parent(s)/guardian(s) and schools.

Institutional Expectations

Charter schools appear to have higher expectations of their students than public schools do. According to individuals

interviewed, charter schools have more graduation requirements than traditional schools. According to Regina her well-funded charter school required more than regular public school:

> Our school's academic requirements exceed those of the regular high school as we are expected to take four years of math, science, English, and one (or more) of the 30 foreign languages we are offered. Although one of the pillars of [my charter school] is field experience, I don't think they tried hard enough to get us (or encourage us to find) out of school internships.

Sasha, who attends a less-funded charter school, explained similar expectations:

> I find myself stressing out about it a lot. In the charter school you need 32 credits to graduate (3,200 hours of works) In the traditional school it's 28 both are way more high in standards than the usual school (the average high school student needs 22 credits to graduate). My parents are generally laid back so they don't really, I'm more hard on myself.

This higher credit load can contribute to higher levels of bad stress, on top of other commitments. Both of these cases have reported feeling bad stress related to school, academics, and expectations. On top of the extra credits, participants also talked about extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities act as a means for student socialization, but the activities are also seen as positive in regards to applying to college and/or work. However, Sasha, who attended a lower-funded charter school, wished she had more free time. The lack of free time may inhibit a student's work ethic in school:

> [In relation to multiple activities] I do feel like they are taking over all of my free time… if I don't go to practice or miss something they [other students] are usually angry with me. I do wish I had more free time to do other things but I chose to do them. I never really have enough time to draw so I sometimes draw instead of doing math.

If time management is imbalanced, academics and other facets of student life may suffer, and bad stress increase. The pressure to juggle many tasks is not specific to school settings – it can also originate in the home.

Regina attended a charter school that was located in a high SES county. They reported "chronic depression" and heightened stress when discussing internalized stress from her parents. Her mother and father attended universities and appeared to be affluent, judging by their academic background:

> "Both my parents went to Northwestern University. My mother became a lawyer and my father a business consultant and between them, there are 4+ degrees. When I realized I didn't have the academics to get into Northwestern, I was disappointed in myself."

This statement helps illustrate how influential parents can be on their children related to future-orientation and bad stress. Sasha attended a charter school but had grown up in a different economic situation but their parental situation has influenced her differently than the latter:

> My biological father is in prison and my step dad has medical problems so he
> doesn't work. My mom on the other hand is an amazing woman. She didn't finish high school. She was working two jobs for as long as I can remember and, if not two jobs, she would work over-time. She tells me all the time to finish high school and go to college because she wishes she had.

From these quotes, both parents and schools can influence how participants perceive future-orientation and the bad stress related to it.

Internalization of Stress

Participants reported being pressured to attain future goals from school, parents, and themselves. Regina and Sasha were from different charter schools, but claimed that most of their stress was due to pressure they put on themselves. However, their expectations were also influenced by schools and parents. Regina offered her insight on expectations:

> …I felt my parents expected my top-notch grades to continue and so I pushed myself more in my academics than in any other aspect of my life. Technically, my parents never pushed me in high school, but they didn't need to because they planted that "perfectionism" seed when I was a kid. I'm afraid it still hasn't left me.

Sasha briefly mentioned both teachers and caretaker(s) as a means for future-oriented internalization:

> Teachers are constantly on your tail because we are the future of the United States, and they don't want us to fail. As for parent's they tell me 'to do anything that makes me happy and successful'. My parents didn't make all of the right decisions when it came to their future, so seeing me succeed would make them more than happy…She [participant's mother] tells me all the time to finish high school and go to college because she wishes she had. I have big dreams and high expectations for my future so, I won't accept anything less.

The above remark illustrates the time orientation pressure from schools and parents. Sasha stated that her future goals were influenced by both her school and her mother. Both institutions recognize that in order for students to be successful in the future, the students should attend universities. In both accounts, each student indicated internalization but from different degrees.

Parents and schools can influence internalization of time as well. Two participants who attended different charter schools expressed discrepancies in time orientation. Sasha claimed to be present-oriented, but indicated future-orientation in their responses too:

> I don't worry about the future. I know I am a go to kind of [person] so when I make my mind up that I'm going to do something; I am going to do it. I try to look a couple years ahead but, I find it difficult when I don't really know what I want to do with my future. I think sticking to the now is good; but it wouldn't kill you to look into the future. Your decisions you make now affect your future. So personally, I think a little

> bit of both [living in the now and future planning] make you live efficiently.

Regina's parents also did not push her in her charter school studies. She indicated future-orientation in her responses, especially in relation to the value of education, "Like most things in life, it's a[s] productive and valuable as you make it. Don't squander your time!"

Charter school participants were not the only people who expressed influences from their parents. Public high school students discussed how their parents and high schools influenced stress toward future goals. Regina recounted her experience with institutions such as her school and parents:

> My school just tried to get people to graduate. If people went to college, that was great. Even going to a community college was a step. Half my class either went to college or worked at a blue–collar job. When it came to family, my parents have a turkey family farm. They told me I had the option of working at that farm or I could go to college. My parents wanted me to live more comfortably than them, but also wanted me to be happy with what I did. I obviously chose college.

Regina is not the only participant who cited their parents giving them the option of autonomous decision- making in relation to future goals. Other participants who attended charter and public schools which were well-funded or lesser-funded cited similar parental perspectives. It was the participants who attended schools in a well-funded county that described worry about grades or attending specific universities.

Participants with single-parented households, or households where there was one parent or guardian working to support the household, expressed less stress in interviews in regards to recalling goals in secondary schools or current future goals. Participants whose parents/guardians both held prestigious jobs reported feeling more stressed to do well in regards to future goals, like the charter school student previously mentioned. Participants from both charter and public high schools remarked that in their secondary school years they felt pushed by themselves, and not necessarily pushed to go to college or do

well for college by parents or schools. However, parents and schools influence internalization of time orientation.

Discussion

Initially, the study hypothesized whether the type of school influenced bad stress associated with future orientation The evidence does not support this hypothesis, however, the funding level of the school can affect the amount of stress coping resources students have access to. Schools that are properly funded can provide proper coping resources for students struggling with bad stress related to future orientation.

If a student performs poorly, the school will still try to mold students to be future-oriented. However, schools are not the only institutions related to bad stress and future orientation. Caregivers can also influence the internalization of both factors. Future orientation is classified as a norm in this article and the coping resources a school provides can influence deviance. Structural strain theory (Merton, 1968) states that if cultural goals cannot be met through socially approved resources and means, deviance in the form of withdrawal from their activity may arise from individuals who cannot reach the goals, or they may reach the prescribed goals in other ways. In other words, there is tremendous incentive for one to follow cultural goals to avoid deviant stigmatization. Many interviewed participants attended college partially due to peer expectations and because it was a norm. One undergraduate student, pseudo-named Miranda, attended a well-funded public school stated that she had the option to attend college, but she also faced financial stress in order to obtain a higher education. Though this appeared to affect her stress level, she found socially acceptable ways (working hard, using federal loans, etc.) to obtain the cultural goal. U.S. society is future-oriented and fast-paced and in order to receive "The American Dream", one must receive a higher-paying job. To get such a job, one must graduate high school and strive for college. Students who are not future-oriented may not have the ability to attend college. Present-orientation may provide a more balanced and low stress life, but according to findings here would be labeled deviant.

In order to avoid deviance, schools try to prepare students for the future through AP classes, expectations for graduation, and college preparation. In spite of future-orientation, in order

to provide avenues for poor performing students to avoid bad stress, deviant labeling, and stigmatization, many schools are instead pushing them toward poor preparation. While still dependent on the level of funding, there was not variation between public and charter school students regarding tutoring or counseling resources. Instead, these resources were given out to the higher performing students or their parents who sought it across both types of schools, contributing to bad stress in other students. Interviewed students noted other students who did not seek those resources were placed in an alternative school, meant for problematic or lower academic performing students, ensuring their eventual graduation and the school's future-oriented goals. According to these findings, public schools and some charter schools practice "handholding" (providing alternative schools or free passes to lower performing students to ensure a certain threshold of graduating students), which can help reduce bad stress of students. The "handholding" allows for students to excel in the present, but it does not provide them with the skills for college. The lack of available resources in less well-funded schools for all students not requesting them meant that many students likely fail at successful future planning, despite the schools' future-orientation.

For higher performing students, participants noted that stress levels were high because of the amount of homework assigned in their AP courses. One of the motivational factors of students was to save money or time for college. Fear appeal theory (Williams, 2010) can help explain such motivation. Fear appeal theory is characterized by a person's motivation to avoid something that might decrease their well-being. Regardless of the type of school, higher performing students were worried about living up to peer, parent, or self- expectations and reported experiencing high levels of bad stress. Specifically, students felt they should pursue a future-oriented goal such as college out of fear they would let down parents or themselves. Students with highly educated and successful parents often feared not getting into colleges similar to their parents'. Students whose parents did not have prestigious of careers noted healthier, positive stress and were less likely to cite past fear of getting into college. These parents used real-life examples (sometimes their own lives) as a possible alternative to college. Participants who attended higher-funded schools

appeared to have more bad stress from their parents and internalization of earlier parental expectations or attitudes in regards to future goals. This is further explained by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971), which suggests that children model behaviors they see in others. Participants reported (directly or indirectly) being influenced by parents. For example, Regina was heavily disappointed that she could not attend the same university her parents attended, and exhibited transference of "perfectionism" through future-orientation. If participants mimic or internalize parental behavior, this could greatly influence stress, and ways of coping with stress.

Conclusion

The original research question was whether the type of school had an effect on a student's future-orientation and perceived bad stress level. Both schools and parents are influential; however the type of school matters less than its funding level. Both schools and parents influence future-orientation, perceived bad stress levels, and methods of coping with it. Students are pushed by parents to meet cultural goals, including future-oriented goals, but to avoid deviant labeling many are not prepared to meet such expectations yet are allowed to out of concern for future-orientation. Other higher performing students experience the fear of letting parents or themselves down by not obtaining future goals, thus increasing bad stress. Those from well-funded schools have mechanisms for coping with such bad stress, regardless of public or alternative schools, but lesser-funded schools do not provide those resources.

More research is needed to explore those school programs that serve as mechanisms for reducing bad stress stemming from future-orientation. Future research could also be conducted on parenting styles and their effects on time orientation and bad stress. For measurements of health, which was a focus of previous studies but not in this paper, future studies should consider longitudinal analysis of future-oriented and present-oriented students and their physical health.

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