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What's There and What's Not: Measuring Daily Hassles in Urban African American Adolescents

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Objective: A review of current empirical research on adolescent stress reveals that measures of stress were developed using primarily suburban adolescents. However, there has not been a thorough examination of stressors that specifically affect urban minority adolescents. This article discusses the findings from the Urban Hassles Scale (UHS). *Method:* A nonrandom sample of 131 African American adolescents was surveyed to assess the stressors within their environments. *Results:* Findings suggest that the UHS has construct and concurrent validity with a Cronbach's alpha of .85. *Conclusions:* The UHS has practical implications for practitioners providing services to adolescents residing in the urban milieu. Social worker researchers can utilize the UHS to further study the cumulative effect of constant stress on adolescents living in such environments.

Many urban adolescents face a myriad of stressors, such as exposure to violence and poverty (Safyer, 1994). When coupled with African American minority status in the United States, these chronic stressors can present significant obstacles toward achievement and success. It is important to understand the daily stressors they encounter, their reaction to these chronic stressors, and the consequences of the stressors. Such an understanding is critical to those providing services and developing programs for this population to help these adolescents achieve their potential and to lessen the effect of stress-related outcomes for them. Additional knowledge and understanding

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of the influence of day-to-day stressors or daily hassles can enhance the assessment of the contributing factors of psychosocial distress among urban African American adolescents.

The relationship between chronic stress that results from daily activities and negative outcomes for children and adolescents, such as drug use and other forms of delinquency, has been documented (Tolan, 1988; Tolan, Miller, & Thomas, 1988; Tolan & Thomas, 1988). In addition, Kanner, Feldman, Weinberger, and Ford (1987) found daily hassles to be positively related to anxiety, depression, and distress, whereas negatively related to self-worth. These studies were conducted, however, with samples that included little or no minority representation. Consequently, the availability of tools to assess the daily hassles experienced by urban minority youth is limited. In addition, the available scales are methodologically flawed. These limitations are a result of several factors: (a) the majority of the stress-related research on urban adolescents focuses on major life events as opposed to daily hassles, (b) the overwhelming majority of the instruments available to measure stress or major life events for adolescents have been developed based on the experiences of nonurban European American youth, and (c) previous scales designed to measure hassles have not been shown to be sufficiently unidimensional. Because of the failure of past authors to address the third point, these scales cannot represent fundamental cumulative measurement. They are multidimensional and therefore cannot be summarized adequately with a single additive score (Michell, 1990; Wright & Masters, 1982).

The purpose of this article is to discuss the development and validation of the Urban Hassles Scale (UHS), a unidimensional scale developed to provide fundamental (or additive conjoint) measurement of daily hassles in an urban environment. We also present findings from a study using this new scale.

MAJOR LIFE EVENTS AND DAILY HASSLES

Lazarus (1984) defined daily hassles as “experiences and conditions of daily living that have been appraised as salient and harmful or threatening to the endorser’s well-being” (p. 376). Hassles have also been defined in the literature as irritating, frustrating everyday experiences arising from the transactions between the individual and the environment (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). It has been posited that daily hassles may provide a better indicator than major life events in the study of causal relationships between stress and adjustment (Luthar & Zigler, 1991) because indexes of life events tell us very little about the day-to-day events that lead to stress in

the lives of people (Kanner et al., 1981). Lazarus indicated that hassles encompass one of four dimensions: (a) environmental conditions, (b) chronic environmental conditions, (c) ongoing worries or concerns, and (d) distressed emotional reactions. The study of daily hassles, individual perceptions, and reactions to these hassles may provide a clearer understanding of coping behaviors, as well as the etiology of psychological and physiological distress than the study of major life events (Compas, Davis, Forsythe, & Wagner, 1987; Kanner et al., 1981; Lazarus, 1984). For instance, results from Rowlinson and Felner (1988) indicated that the assessment of daily hassles in adolescents' lives appears at least to offer a much needed supplement to standard life events methodology, which by itself was insufficient for fully understanding the relationship between life stress and adjustment.

Research on Stressors Experienced by Adolescents

The empirical literature on the measurement of stressors experienced by adolescents reflects the experiences of predominantly Euro-American and middle-class youth living outside urban environments. Additionally, the scales primarily measure life events versus daily hassles. For example, in the development of the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale (APES), Compas et al. (1987) selected 658 adolescents to identify scale items. No reliability coefficients were reported for the APES. Less than 1% of their sample identified as an ethnic minority, and most were from rural or suburban middle-class backgrounds. Following the identification of both daily and major significant events experienced by these adolescents, Compas et al. established the reliability of the measure on another homogeneous sample of adolescents in Vermont—also predominantly rural and Euro-American middle-class.

Similarly, Mullis, Youngs, Mullis, and Rathge (1993) utilized a 36-item scale called the Life Experiences Survey (LES) to measure the number of positive and negative life events experienced in a sample of 1,740 high school students. The reliability coefficient for the LES was not reported. These researchers indicated that 88% of their sample was Euro-American. No information was provided regarding the ethnic composition of the remaining 12% of the sample. These two studies reflect the reliance of researchers on middle-class, primarily Euro-American samples in stress-related studies and those life events that occur episodically within those groups. This clearly indicates that the investigation of stress among urban disadvantaged adolescents is an important area deserving of further study.

Swearingen and Cohen (1985) developed the Junior High Life Experiences Survey (JHLES) to address some of the limitations of previous measures of adolescent stress in that the JHLES asks youth to rate the severity of

the stressful experience. This study included two separate groups of middle school (i.e., seventh and eighth grade) boys and girls with sample sizes of 48 and 233. African American adolescents composed 25% and 21% of each respective sample. However, the events included on the scale did not address the daily experiences of adolescents in an urban environment. For instance, experiences related to daily safety in the community were not addressed. Examples of such concerns are taking different ways home each day to stay away from drug dealers and users or concern about the appropriate color of clothing to wear to prevent possible victimization. Items such as these are not included on the JHLES.

Daily Hassles Measures and Their Dimensionality

Those studying child and adolescent adjustment have also focused some attention on chronic stressors. Kanner et al. used several different versions of a children's hassles scale that varied in length between 25 and 43 items (Kanner et al., 1987). The dimensionality of this measure, however, is unclear. A factor analysis was reported in the later article, but this 25-item scale was simultaneously analyzed with an uplift scale and the dimensional space in the factor analysis was limited to two factors. It was not reported whether additional factors are necessary to provide an adequate fit to the data. Likewise, Tolan et al. (1988) used a 16-item daily hassles scale with items culled from a variety of sources. However, they did not report a dimensionality analysis of their measure.

In contrast, Seidman et al. (1995) reported a five-factor solution for their 28-item daily hassles scale. The items in this scale were selected from Rowlinson and Felner's (1988) daily hassles questionnaire. As the items in this scale are similar in content to those used in the studies described above, it is likely that the multidimensionality documented by Seidman et al. is also present in the other scales. The dimensionality of these measures is an important issue. Attempts to apply unidimensional models to multidimensional phenomenon means that none of the underlying attributes will be scaled accurately (Jacoby, 1991). Unidimensionality is achieved when only the trait of interest is driving the responses to the questions. Often, however, another trait interferes. Then, the practical result is that a single scale score cannot summarize such a multidimensional phenomena. Similarly, scales that are insufficiently unidimensional cannot provide fundamental measurement that is required to arrive at a valid summated score (Michell, 1990). The dimensionality of a set of scale items is an empirical question. In practice, scale development is an iterative process in which items that compose a scale are assessed and reworked. Empirical dimensional analysis reveals items that do

not function as intended. These items can be reworked or dropped with the ultimate goal of achieving fundamental measurement of the phenomenon under study.

Daily Stressors of Urban Adolescents

Given the literature, it is apparent that there is no appropriate instrument relevant to the daily experiences of disadvantaged urban adolescents. Yet, such an instrument is needed, as the origin of some hassles that people experience that affects coping behaviors and psychological distress may be unique to that person's environment (Kanner et al., 1981; Marsella, 1998). The urban environment presents its own unique set of circumstances, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Luthar and Zigler (1991) suggested that urban adolescents in general and minority adolescents in particular experience daily hassles that are quite different and, in some instances, more stress producing than those of majority or White middle-class adolescents. Safyer (1994) pointed out that life in the inner city is characterized by numerous factors, such as violence, poor housing, and drug use, which affect the development of adolescents exposed to these conditions on a daily basis. Furthermore, there are no daily hassles scales that can be shown empirically to meet the definition of fundamental measurement.

Given these considerations, the development and use of a statistically valid measure of stress that reflects daily stressors in an urban setting is critical for the comprehensive understanding of the issues and concerns of youth in these environments. The following is a description of the development and statistical properties of such a measure, the UHS.

METHOD

Development of the UHS

Development of the UHS was based on the first author's work experience and previous research with adolescents living in urban environments. After the UHS was developed, the items were presented to a group of adjudicative adolescents for comment and suggestions. These adolescents provided an insight into the daily experiences within the context of the urban landscape. Their understanding of and experience with these events facilitated the development of the UHS. These adolescents found items relevant to their experiences. They also provided additional items; however, those will be included in the future development of the UHS. Table 1 shows the starting pool of 12

TABLE 1: The Urban Hassles Scale—Sample Frequencies

Item	Hassle	<i>A Lot</i>		<i>A Little</i>		<i>None</i>	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1	Asked for money by drug addicts	66	51.2	37	28.2	19.8	20.2
2	Take different routes home to keep safe ^a	87	66.9	28	21.5	15	11.5
3	Pressured by friends to join a gang ^a	109	84.5	3	2.3	17	13.2
4	Made fun of because of grades ^a	95	73.6	22	17.1	12	9.3
5	Worried that someone will try to take your clothes, shoes, or money ^a	71	54.6	38	29.2	21	16.2
6	Pressured to carry weapon for protection ^a	79	60.8	31	23.8	20	15.4
7	Pressured for sex by boyfriend/girlfriend	79	60.3	31	23.8	23	17.6
8	Must work to help pay bills at home ^a	97	74.6	22	16.9	11	8.5
9	Nervous about gunshots/sirens at night ^a	74	56.5	33	25.2	24	18.3
10	Worrying about safety of friends and family members	29	22.3	48	36.9	53	40.8
11	Keeping your fear about safety secret from your friends ^a	81	61.8	29	22.1	21	16
12	Offered sex by drug addicts for money ^a	109	83.2	8	6.1	14	10.7

a. Item retained in the final scale.

items. The resulting UHS is a 9-item measure designed to quantify hassles related to common experiences that urban adolescents may encounter. Three items were dropped because they did not operate as intended, as will be shown below. Respondents to the UHS were asked to indicate on a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*none at all*), to 1 (*a little*), to 2 (*a lot*) whether they experienced the hassles. Items on the scale were summed for a score between 0 and 18.

Assessing Validity: The Rasch Model and Measurement Theory

A number of shortcomings have been identified in applying classical test theory as a means of validating scales (Hambleton, Swaminathan, & Rogers, 1991). As an alternative, the Rasch model (Rasch, 1960/1980) is a measurement model that can be used to confirm that a set of observations may be combined to measure a latent construct. Application of the Rasch model and other item-response theory models for scale development has been growing rapidly in a number of social and behavioral science disciplines, including social work (e.g., Nugent & Hankins, 1989). The Rasch model's primary appeal is that it is the only currently available mathematical model that represents the conditions necessary and sufficient for fundamental measurement to occur.

Although the Rasch model was originally designed for use with dichotomous items, it may be generalized and applied to rating scales with multiple

ordered response categories, such as the UHS. The Rasch rating scale model takes the form

$$\ln(p_{ijk}/1 - p_{ijk-1}) = B_j - D_i + T_k, \quad (1)$$

where the log odds of endorsing category k is determined by the difference between participant ability (or intensity on the latent trait) and item difficulty (p_{ijk} is person j 's probability of endorsing category k of item i , B_j is the participant's ability, D_i is the item i difficulty, and T_k is the threshold for category k). Items that require a higher level on the latent trait are said to be more difficult. In the matter under study here, the participants' ability is the level of daily hassles they face. Higher ability means that they face a greater array of daily hassles and are therefore higher on the latent trait. Much of the foundational work for these models has occurred within educational psychology and the terminology has carried over from that domain. The term *ability* only applies loosely in the current context and does not imply any inherent genetic characteristic. Rather, it should be interpreted as a generic term for the level of the latent or unobserved trait possessed by the study participant as measured by the scale. If the data are consistent with the Rasch model, then it is reasonable to assume that additive conjoint measurement has been achieved (Wright & Masters, 1982).

The primary assumption of the model expressed in Equation 1 is that a respondent's probability of selecting category i depends only on two things: the respondent's level on the latent trait and the characteristics of the item. What this means is that the scale is assumed to be sufficiently unidimensional in that only one concept is measured by a set of items. Although this assumption cannot be strictly met due to the complexity of cognitive and personality factors, what is required to meet this assumption is the presence of a dominant factor that influences performance so as to be unidimensional in practice. As noted above, failing to meet the unidimensional assumption means the participant's performance cannot be captured by a single score value.

A corollary to the dimensional assumption is that when the unobserved latent trait is held constant, item responses are statistically independent. This is termed *local independence*. In other words, the ability specified in the model is the only factor influencing the participants' responses to items. A test of this assumption is useful because local independence is evidence that the scale is sufficiently unidimensional and not confounded by unintended nuisance dimensions.

The Rasch model has several advantages when compared with classical test theory models. It is beyond the scope of this article to describe these

advantages in detail. But it should be noted that the Rasch model is falsifiable, whereas classical test theory models are not. If the data do not fit the measurement model, this would be evidence that the scale has not met the minimum definition of cumulative fundamental measurement. Another important advantage of the Rasch model is that person ability and item difficulty parameters are essentially sample-free estimates in that the distribution of item difficulties does not influence the ability estimates, and the distribution of abilities in the sample does not influence the item difficulty estimates.

By conceptualizing the scale as a linear measure like a ruler, there is no need to give items different weights. What is desired is to identify items that cover a wide range of difficulty. This permits us to place the survey participants along the continuum. Items that are difficult to endorse because they represent more serious hassles provide the information necessary to distinguish among adolescents at the higher end. Similarly, easy items provide the same information for youth at the low end.

A final advantage of the Rasch model is its utility for the investigation of item bias or, more formally, differential-item functioning (DIF). An assumption of the Rasch model is that the measuring device operates consistently across demographic groups. Using the results of the Rasch model, we can make probabilistic statements about men and women, for example, who share the same level of intensity on the unobserved trait as measured by the scale but who respond in different ways to a specific item. Equivalently, we can determine how much higher (or lower) a participant from one socio-demographic group must be on the unobserved trait to have the same probability of endorsing an item as a participant from another group. In other words, we can identify observed measures that are biased measuring devices across groups. We can also specify how these differing probabilities of item response vary across the range of the latent attitude continuum and at what level of intensity the response probability difference is greatest (or least). For more details on all these important points, see Wright and Masters (1982).

Procedures

The sample participants were selected through a nonrandom cross-sectional survey design. Future research on this topic will seek to include a broader and possibly a random sample of adolescents. Local agencies providing services (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs) to disadvantaged at-risk adolescents were approached to participate in this study. On agreement to participate, the adolescents in these programs were informed of the study and provided with information and consent forms to share with parents. All participants were required to provide parental consent to participate and com-

plete the survey. The survey was administered in an anonymous group setting. Participants were instructed not to place any identifying information on the survey instrument.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 131 African American adolescents who were part of a larger study on resiliency completed the UHS (Miller, 1997). Women composed 63% of the sample ($n = 83$) and men composed 37% ($n = 48$). The age range for this sample was between 14 and 19 years of age ($M = 15.9$, $SD = 1.15$).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 reflects the frequencies for each item on the UHS. For each item on the UHS, more than 20% of the respondents indicated that they had experienced a particular hassle "a lot." The two most common hassles reported ("a little" and "a lot") by the respondents were being pressured to join a gang (86.8%) and offered sex by drug addicts for money (89.3%). The most common hassle experienced "a lot" was being pressured to join a gang (84.5%).

Dimensionality and Item Analysis

An initial principal component factor analysis of the initial pool of 12 items with oblimin rotation reveals three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. This preliminary analysis suggests the need to evaluate individual item function, as the scale is clearly not sufficiently unidimensional to justify the use of assigning a single scale score to summarize the level of daily hassles faced by each survey participant. For a more rigorous item analysis, we apply the Rasch rating scale model.

Table 2 shows the fit of the UHS to the Rasch model. The columns labeled "Infit" and "Outfit" are standardized normal variables with an expected value of 0. They are used to test hypotheses about the fit of items to the model. The infit statistic is more sensitive to misfitting responses to items near the person's level on the latent continuum. The outfit statistic is sensitive to misfitting responses to items further away from the person's level on the latent trait. The null hypothesis is that the item fits within a unidimensional scale. Typically, infit and outfit values that exceed ± 2.0 suggest misfit at a conventional Type I alpha level of approximately .05 (Smith, 1991). Panel A of

TABLE 2: Fit of Urban Hassles Scale to the Rasch Model

Item	Difficulty	Panel A			Panel B		Panel C Loadings	Panel D Z
		SE	Infit	Outfit	Infit	Outfit		
1	0.50	0.14	1.5	2.6				
7	0.18	0.15	3.1	2.3				
10	1.75	0.14	-0.2	2.1				
6	0.09	0.15	0.5	1.0	1.3	1.2	.57	2.32
12	-0.97	0.20	0.7	0.4	1.4	1.3	.64	3.38
3	-0.88	0.20	-0.1	-1.2	0.1	-0.9	.78	-0.20
4	-0.52	0.18	-0.6	-0.1	-0.4	0.5	.71	1.83
8	-0.66	0.18	-0.4	-0.1	0.5	0.6	.66	0.31
9	0.31	0.15	-0.9	-1.3	-0.3	0.1	.66	2.43
11	0.09	0.15	-1.1	-1.0	0.1	-0.1	.68	-0.46
2	-0.20	0.16	-1.3	-1.9	-0.9	-1.0	.74	-0.10
5	0.30	0.15	-1.6	-1.5	-1.6	-1.0	.70	1.50

Table 2 shows the fit for all 12 items. Items 1, 7, and 10 show statistically significant misfit. Panel B of Table 2 shows the fit statistics for the remaining 9 items after dropping the 3 items with the greatest misfit to the model. The remaining 9 fit quite well, as all the infit and outfit estimates are within ± 2.0 . As a final check, a principal component factor analysis was conducted on the reduced scale, and it reveals only one eigenvalue greater than 1.0. Panel C of Table 2 shows the factor loadings for the 9 items on that factor. The smallest loading is .56, and the remainder exceed .65. Based on Rasch model fit statistics and the subsequent factor analysis, it is safe to conclude these 9 items compose a unidimensional daily hassles scale. The 9 items were summed to obtain a daily hassles score for each participant. The mean score for daily hassles is 14.24 with a standard deviation of 4.18. The mean for women is higher ($M = 15.38$, $SD = 2.76$) than for men ($M = 12.26$, $SD = 5.38$), $t(121) = 4.25$, $p < .000$.

DIF—Item Bias

Comparisons between men and women assumes the measuring device is operating without bias across sociodemographic groups. As with the issue of dimensionality, the consistency assumption is an empirical question as well. As noted above, the Rasch model permits a test of this assumption. Briefly, the latent trait is held constant, and the responses to individual items are compared across groups. It is anticipated, for example, that men and women at the

same level on the latent trait will have the same probability of responding to category k for item i . Probabilities' differences beyond ± 2 standard errors are evidence of item bias (Smith, 1991). As with all inferential statistical procedures, sufficiently large samples will guarantee statistical significance. So, magnitude of the bias is more important when judging the substantive significance of any bias found.

Panel D of Table 2 shows the standard normal deviate (labeled Z) that tests the item bias hypothesis. We can reject the null hypothesis of no gender bias for Items 6, 9, and 12. Significances of the bias for Items 6 and 9 are slightly above the cutoff of 2.0. The largest bias is for Item 12. Although the size of the bias for Items 6 and 9 are not alarming, experience in this type of analysis suggests that given sample size used in this study, a standardized score of 3.38 found for Item 12 is cause for concern. The measurement model overpredicts the mean response expected for men and underpredicts the mean response expected for women. As the content of the question deals with being "offered sex by drug addicts for money," there may be some confusion among the adolescents as to the intent of the item. Further research on this item is warranted.

In the final test of construct and concurrent validity, it was found that the UHS is positively associated with a similar scale that measures the perception of more serious hassles ($r = .20, p < .03$) and negatively correlated with grade point average ($r = .36, p < .000$) and ethnic identity ($r = -.24, p < .008$). Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .85$) for the revised scale suggests that it is reliable as well.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The preliminary findings from this study indicate that daily hassles are a part of the urban landscape that may require a degree of adaptation and adjustment on the part of the adolescent. Given their occurrence, these daily stressful experiences may contribute to detrimental outcomes such as stress and development of maladaptive response patterns. However, additional research is necessary to ascertain their influence on behavior and adaptation.

This study empirically validates the properties of the UHS and shows that it can provide social workers and other practitioners with a valuable tool to use in their assessment and screening of adolescents in urban settings. For instance, information obtained from an adolescent about the daily hassles that he or she experiences can facilitate discussions about how he or she responds to and copes with these stressors. Furthermore, such information

can contribute to more complete assessments and help guide appropriate interventions. Service providers can use the UHS as a screening tool to enhance awareness of the stressors encountered by these adolescents and to help guide service and program delivery. This measure can also be viewed as an adjunct to the measurement of life events, filling in gaps about the daily events that may have an effect on overall well-being. For example, the UHS measure was found to be negatively associated with academic achievement (Miller & MacIntosh, 1999).

Male African American adolescents are at such a tremendous risk for violence, school failure, and incarceration that they have been identified as an endangered species (Taylor-Gibbs, 1988). Therefore, the use of this scale with this population would be very valuable in assessing their exposure to stressors that may contribute to their involvement in self-destructive behaviors. An interesting finding of this study that necessitates attention is the high percentage of women (89%) that reported being pressured to join gangs. Although delinquent behavior among male adolescents has received tremendous attention from service providers and researchers, the growing number of female adolescents involved in delinquent behavior (or pressured to participate) too often remains a peripheral issue—an issue that may grow quietly and unchecked without appropriate and timely intervention.

Further validation of the UHS is necessary through additional research with culturally diverse samples drawn from different geographical locations. This should provide researchers with information as to the variability of daily hassles experienced in differing urban locales. As for practitioners, additional research should illuminate the daily hassles that may be common to a particular urban setting. Future research should also seek to establish the chronicity and frequency of the hassles. As Kanner et al. (1981) posited, those considerations are critical to any measure of daily hassles.

Adolescents' perceptions of the severity of these hassles and the inclusion of additional hassles are necessary steps in future research on and use of the UHS. Furthermore, research needs to be undertaken examining the coping strategies of urban adolescents in response to these hassles. The effect of daily hassles on adolescent academic performance is also an area in which the UHS has potential utility (Miller, 1997).

In conclusion, the findings in this study are limited by its nonrandom sample. These findings, however, point to the need for further investigation of those stressors unique to the urban environment and of their effect on those experiencing them. Social work has a rich history of responding to the environmental conditions of its clientele, and the urban environment now provides the profession with the unique opportunity to expand its research and

practice focus in an area in which researchers in other disciplines, such as psychology, are showing increasing interest.

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