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Rebekah Kanefsky

University of Central Florida, rebekah.kanefsky@knights.ucf.edu

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Perceived Locus of Control in the Children of Military and Civilian Families Affected By Deployment and Divorce

By: Rebekah Kanefsky

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Sandra Neer

UCF Department of Psychology

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ABSTRACT: This study was designed to explore the differences between locus of control (LOC) in children from civilian and military families and to investigate whether military deployment is associated with an external locus of control. Existing literature has focused on the negative implications of external LOC for children's mental health and achievement. However, research regarding this construct related to children of military families has not been conducted. In the present study, LOC was measured by the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Children, designed for individuals from the 3rd to the 12th grade. The 54 participants in this study ranged in age from 7 to 17 and came from either a military family with a deployed parent, a civilian family with two caregivers in the home, or a divorced/separated civilian family. After conducting a univariate one-way ANOVA on the data, it was found that children of deployed military families did not score significantly different for mean locus of control than civilian separated/divorced families, or civilian intact families. A correlation comparing age and LOC scores likewise found no significant relationship.

KEYWORDS: locus of control, military families

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INTRODUCTION

Locus of control (LOC) is a mental construct that describes whether an individual perceives events to be the result of actions or as the result of external forces (Rotter, 1966). There are two types of LOC: individuals with an internal locus of control typically believe that their own actions influence what they experience and what happens in their lives. By contrast, individuals with an external locus of control typically believe that fate and outward forces have more impact on their lives and experiences (Rotter, 1966). Previous research has shown that LOC is related to children's behavior and how they interpret events around them. Knowledge of how family life can influence LOC (internal vs. external) is important in understanding children's reasoning and thought processes. Individuals with an internal locus of control tend to perceive events as occurring as a result of their own actions and abilities; therefore, they are likely to believe that they have the power to affect their own lives. Individuals with an external orientation, however, often feel less empowered and are likely to believe the events that happen to them are due to chance or fate (Rotter, 1996).

Although research has been conducted on LOC with other family dynamics and situations (Lancaster & Richmond, 1983; Post & Robinson, 1998; Tesiny, Leftkowitz, & Gordon, 1980), research regarding LOC has not been conducted specifically with the children of military families. Yet there is a large number of children in military families in the U.S. In fact, in February of 2007, the American Psychological Association's Presidential Task Force reported that approximately 700,000 children in America had at least one deployed parent. This area is thus a worthwhile area of research due to many children experiencing parental deployment, the paucity of research regarding LOC in children from these military families, and the possible negative implications that external locus of control may have for the mental health of young children and adolescents. The study of LOC is additionally important in order to measure possible mental health and physical health implications. Therefore, this study examines the differences in measured locus of control in military families with only one parent in the home as a result of deployment, civilian intact families with two parental figures, and divorced or separated civilian families with one caregiver in the home.

Specifically, I predict that children from military families

with a deployed parent will demonstrate greater external (as opposed to internal) locus of control than children from intact civilian families and civilian separated/divorced families. Next, I predict that children of civilian intact families will be more likely to attribute experiences in their lives to internal factors. Additionally, I predict that while children in the civilian separated/divorced group would be less likely to make external attributions, these children would still exhibit more externality than children in the intact group. Last, due to previous research, I predict that the age of children and scores on the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale will be related, with older children scoring more internally than younger children (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973).

Military Deployment and Children

Although there is a general consensus that parental deployment can affect a child's development and mental and physical health (Mulrooney, 2012), LOC specifically has not been studied in children in these situations. Research with this population has primarily focused on risk and resiliency. Factors that could potentially cause harm to children of this population include frequent relocation, absence of a parent due to the deployment itself, uncertainty regarding the deployed parent's safety, and parental development of PTSD (Palmer, 2008; Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Factors that may contribute to the resiliency of children in military families include attentive parenting, strong social support from the community and family, and successful individual coping strategies.

In addition, to such risk and resiliency factors, it is also important to study locus of control in children due to its relation to other constructs such as depression, anxiety, and school performance. A study by Lester et al. (2010), for example, examined depression, anxiety, and behavioral issues in grade school children with a deployed parent or recently returned parent involved in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom. The relationship between anxiety and deployment was significant, with a third of the military children rating higher levels of anxiety than civilian controls—as measured by the Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children. Moreover, scores for depression and externalizing behaviors in military children were positively correlated with the length of the deployment (Lester et al., 2010).

Similarly, Chartrand and colleagues (2008) studied the impact of deployment on externalizing and internalizing

behavioral issues in children aged 1 ½ to 5 years old in comparison to their civilian peers. (Externalizing behaviors are outwardly expressed behaviors of children and adolescents that result from an individual's negative perception of his or her environment and typically include aggression and other forms of "acting out.") Behavioral issues were measured through a parent-completed evaluation of the child's behavior called the Child Behavior Check List (CBCL) and a teacher-evaluation form called the CBCL-Teacher Report Form (TRF). As expected, children from families with a deployed parent demonstrated significantly greater externalizing behaviors, as measured by the CBCL and TRF and greater total scores on the CBCL than children not experiencing parental deployment (Chartrand et al., 2008). However, clinically significant scores on the CBCL and TRF were only noted for internalizing behaviors in children aged 3 and older from the military deployed group (Chartrand et al., 2008). Another limitation of the study is that the children's ratings were compiled by the child's parent, who may also be experiencing stress related to spousal deployment. Due to the added stress the parents may be experiencing, their self-reports might be biased or otherwise inaccurate.

Locus of Control and Social Learning Theory

The construct of locus of control is based on the theoretical foundation of Social Learning Theory. In this theory, reinforcement encourages the belief that in the future a certain behavior will be followed by that reinforcement (Rotter, 1966; Bandura & Walters, 1977). A pattern of behavior consistently followed by reinforcement strengthens the expectation of this behavior pattern occurring in the future. Similarly, depending on an individual's history of expectations being met or not met, he or she will vary in the degree to which they attribute occurrences in their lives to their own behaviors. If a person expects that reinforcement is not contingent on their actions, they may believe that experiences in their life are "luck determined" or external (Rotter, 1966).

Locus of Control and Parental Alcoholism

A study conducted by Post and Robinson (1998) showed that an external LOC was demonstrated more frequently in children with alcoholic parents. An alcoholic parent can be undependable and inconsistent, similar to an insensitive or inattentive mother in infancy. This uncertainty experienced by the child may leave him or her with feelings of powerlessness, which in turn may

lead to an external locus of control. Because children of alcoholics tend to feel disempowered, they are more likely to perform worse in school and be less motivated towards achievement (Post & Robinson, 1998). Carrying into young adulthood, individuals with an alcoholic parent were shown to experience greater levels of locus externality than individuals without an alcoholic parent (Robinson & Goodpaster, 1991).

Locus of Control and Parental Divorce/Absence

The effect of divorce on the locus of control of children has also been studied, and it has been suggested that children in divorced families may perceive control over their world to be external as a result of lack of control and uncertainty in the family's location, financial status, and parental presence (Kalter et al., 1984; Lancaster & Richmond, 1983). The absence of a father figure due to divorce or parental separation has also been shown to impact a child's locus of control. Children without present fathers are more likely to perceive their lives to be affected by fate, chance, or powerful others, and therefore they are more likely than not to develop an external locus of control (Lancaster & Richmond, 1983).

In one study, the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Children (N-SLCS) was administered to children who had a father present and to those that had an absent father (Lancaster & Richmond, 1983). In the study, children with an absent father were prone to making external attributions. In comparison, children with a present father exhibited perceived internalization of control. Uncertainty in finances and residency can occur as a result of the absence of a father; therefore this could lead to children perceiving reduced control in their lives. However, there have been mixed results in studies examining the impact of divorce on children. In another study, there was no significant difference between the construct of locus of control in divorced families and intact families (Krakauer, 1993). Other research has shown that children from divorced homes perceive events through a more internal locus of control when compared with children from intact homes. This outcome, in turn, could be a result of children from divorced homes accepting greater responsibility in response to the divorce (Kalter et al., 1984).

Locus of Control and Implications for Health and Achievement

There may be a relationship between the LOC and

children's mental and physical health. For example, children with higher levels of external locus of control also experience higher levels of depression (Tesiny, Lefkowitz, & Gordon, 1980; Siegel & Griffin, 1984). A study by Holder and Levi (1988) shows that college students with higher anxiety and depression ratings are more likely to have an external locus of control. In contrast, lower levels of depression and anxiety have been measured in people who perceive consequences as a direct result of their own actions (Holder & Levi, 1988; Molinari & Khanna, 1981). Nevertheless, the relationship between overall mental health development and locus of control is complex and directionality is not one-way. Therefore, many concerns arise regarding development and the overall mental health of children who make external, as opposed to internal, attributions.

In addition to health concerns, performance in school has been found to be negatively affected when a child perceives that occurrences in life are due to external circumstances (Tesiny, Lefkowitz, & Gordon, 1980). Individuals who perceive that their actions do not affect their environment may adopt a passive role in their academic success by failing to study, pay attention in class, or complete their homework. Generally speaking, individuals who make external attributions and who do not actively and persistently invest in their academics will tend to be low achieving and poor performing students (Rotter, 1966; McGhee & Crandall, 1968). Research conducted on locus of control and academic performance is based on the assumption that children who perceive grades in school as a result of their own effort may be more likely to set high achieving goals for themselves. By contrast, children who make external attributions tend to believe that their academic triumphs or failures will occur regardless of their effort. McGhee and Crandall (1968) also suggest that children who view their grades to be a result of luck or destiny may be less motivated to study or actively pursue achievement, while the children who perceive their academic success to be determined by their efforts and abilities score higher in academic performance (as measured by an achievement test and report cards) than children who externally attributed their successes to fate, luck, or powerful others (McGhee & Crandall, 1968).

Research on LOC and learned helplessness further supports the relationship between external attribution and lower academic performance. An important study is Dweck and Repucci (1973), who gave a performance task to fifth graders. When the children consistently

were unable to succeed at the task, some maintained their determination to continue trying their best and some of the kids went on to perform worse. The Intellectual Achievement Responsibility scale, which attempts to determine where responsibility lies (external vs. internal) in regards to achievement was administered to the children. The study showed that children who tended to take personal responsibility for their achievement were also the same students who kept trying their hardest at the task, whereas the children who did not see themselves as able to control their successes were the ones who were less persistent when exposed to failure. To sum up, research to date has established the concepts of internality (associated with motivation to achieve) and externality (associated with less motivation to achieve/perform) (Dweck & Repucci, 1973; Rotter, 1966). These findings further reinforce the notion that internal locus of control is associated with higher levels of achievement and performance; therefore, it is important to further explore the potential impact of military deployment on locus of control.

METHODS

The current study is part of a larger, ongoing project "When Parents Go to War: Psychosocial Adjustment among the Families of Deployed OEF/OIF Service Members," funded by a grant from The Department of Defense. This study was conducted in the clinic at the University of Central Florida's UCF RESTORES (University Center for Research and Treatment on Response to Extreme Stressors) under Principal Investigator Deborah C. Beidel. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the questionnaire used in this study was received on February 2, 2015.

Participants

The participating sample for this study consisted of 54 children (ages 7-17) who were recruited for the larger study. Participants were either from (1) a military family with two caregivers in which one of the caregivers has been deployed for more than 30 days, $N=24$; (2) a civilian intact family, $N=21$; or (3) a civilian family in which the caregivers have been separated/divorced for at least 30 days, $N=9$.

Participants were excluded from the study if they were:

- (a) psychotic, reported suicidal ideation, or suffered from deficits in intelligence,

- (b) experiencing a big life stressor in their family unit besides parental separation,
- (c) children who had an IQ score that fell below 80 as measured by the Block Design and Vocabulary components of the WISC-IV, or
- (d) using medication that was known to effect cortisol levels.

Additionally, the larger study also included children from families in which a parent has been work deployed and children from intact military families. However, these two family groups were not included in the present study due to small sample sizes.

Measure

My study assessed the construct of locus of control using the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Children (N-SLCS) (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973). Children can receive a score that ranges from 0-40, with the higher numerical score indicating a higher level of an external locus of control. In the development of this scale, older participants tend to demonstrate more internal scores than younger children (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973).

Construct validity of the N-SLCS was further shown by its significant relationship with the Bialer-Cromwell Children's Locus of Control Scale ($r = .41, p < .05$), when looking at children ages 9 through 11. Also, a significant relationship between the Nowicki-Strickland adult scales and the Rotter Scale for Locus of Control was shown on two separate studies of college students, with ($n = 76, r = .61, p < .01$; $n = 46, r = .38, p < .01$; Nowicki & Strickland, 1973).

Procedure

Prior to the family assessment, a packet of self-report forms (including the N-SLCS) was mailed to participating families and children. The packet was then either mailed back to the Psychology Clinic at the University of Central Florida or collected by a representative from the Military Families Project upon its completion.

Data Analysis

I conducted descriptive statistics on the data for mean age and scores on the N-SLCS (see Tables 1-2). I also created histograms for the scores of each family group

and found the data to be normally distributed in terms of skewness, kurtosis, and the Shapiro-Wilk test (see Tables 3-4).

Next, I conducted a univariate one-way ANOVA on the three family groups and performed a correlation between age and locus of control in order to test for a possible relationship between the two variables.

RESULTS

I conducted a univariate ANOVA on locus of control scores of military deployed, civilian intact, and civilian divorced or separated family groups and, to my surprise, found no significant differences for locus of control, [$F(2,51) = 2.12, p = .13$; see Table 5], as measured by the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Children. The civilian divorced group's mean score was the greatest ($M = 15.89, SD = 5.33$), followed by the deployed military family group's mean score ($M = 13.96, SD = 4.28$), and the intact civilian group's mean score ($M = 12.29, SD = 4.40$). In addition, I found no significant relationship between age and scores on the N-SLCS (See Table 6).

DISCUSSION

Contrary to my initial hypothesis, there were no significant differences in locus of control between children from military deployed families, civilian intact families, and civilian divorced families. I conducted a correlation between age and locus of control scores in order to determine if age was related to locus of control in each of the family groups. However, age did not have a significant relationship with locus of control scores as measured by the N-SLCS in this study. This finding is not consistent with previous research suggesting that locus of control is significantly related to an individual's age (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973).

Although data was collected from military intact families and work "deployed" civilian families in the larger study, I was unable to include that data in the analysis in the current study due to a small number of participants in comparison with the size of the other family groups. This additional "work deployed" family group may be more similar in situation to the military deployed group. Without the work "deployed" civilian group, the military deployed group did not have a similar civilian counterpart. Had a more similar comparison group for the military deployed family been collected and included in the data analysis, a two-way comparison between family status

(intact or separated family groups) and family type (military or civilian) could have been made.

Additionally, the theory behind locus of control does not concretely define at what point in human development locus of control is particularly formative or at what age locus of control is fully formed. Therefore, it is difficult to know if the children's assessed locus of control at the time of the survey completion is representative of the children's perceived control resulting from the parental deployment or divorce. This inability to objectively measure and determine the development of locus of control in children raises the concern that the subjects from families experiencing deployment or divorce could have reported different answers and received a different score on the N-SLCS had they been questioned a few months earlier or later. Perhaps inadequacies in this construct's measurement and the inability to concretely define the development of locus of control through a child's life cycle may help explain part of the findings of the study.

Alternatively, it may be possible that the theory behind locus of control does not portray a complete picture. Although it is postulated that a child experiencing stressful life situations (i.e. deployment or divorce) would develop an external locus of control, this is not without exception. Not every child will fit perfectly into the mold that the theory suggests. In the face of stress, some individuals are more resilient than others and could potentially be seen as exhibiting an internal locus of control instead of what is expected. In the alternative, it is also important to note that the statistical power in this study was very low (power = 0.41) due to the small sample size, which may have affected the significance of the study. The initial power analysis reported that in order to have a moderate effect size of 0.25, and power = 0.95, the total sample size would need to equal 252. The small sample size of the present study caused the power of the overall study to be weak and may have affected the findings.

Future research questions may include the potential implications that external and internal locus of control could have on children and how different attributional styles could hamper or help children cope with the stressors of divorce and separation. Future research regarding locus of control in the military demographic may still be conducted with a similar premise to the current study; however, an additional group that consists of children from family situations in which a parent is

work "deployed" or works away from home for a certain extended period of time should be added to the sample. This family group may be more similar and therefore a better comparison to the military deployed group than the civilian divorced or separated group. A study utilizing this group may be more indicative of the influence that locus of control may have on children's mental and physical health.

To sum up, this study's results indicates no significant difference in mean locus of control scores for military deployed, civilian intact, and civilian divorced/separated children and no significant relationship for age and scores on the N-SLCS. However, a future study with a larger and more complete sample and a more complete and concrete understanding of locus of control may produce different results. Researchers should further explore the circumstances around locus of control development, the positive and negative implications of internal and external attributional tendencies, and the development of interventions specific for children who may be at risk for mental illness as a result of parental deployment.

APPENDIX A

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for age of participants and scores on the N-SLCS.

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<i>Descriptive Statistics for Military Deployed Family Group</i>			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Family Group A	1.0000	.00000	24
Scores on N-SLCS	13.96	4.278	24
Participant Age	10.7500	2.90801	24
<i>Descriptive Statistics for Military Deployed Family Group</i>			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Family Group C	2.0000	.00000	21
Scores on N-SLCS	12.29	4.440	21
Participant Age	10.5714	2.29285	21
<i>Descriptive Statistics for Military Deployed Family Group</i>			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Family Group D	3.0000	.00000	9
Scores on N-SLCS	15.89	5.326	9
Participant Age	11.3333	1.80278	9

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for family groups.

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<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Family Group A	13.96	4.278	24
Family Group C	12.29	4.440	21
Family Group D	15.89	5.326	9
Total	13.63	4.615	54

Dependent Variable: Scores on N-SLCS

Group A = Military deployed family group

Group C = Intact civilian family group

Group D = Divorced - separated family groups

APPENDIX B

Table 3: Shapiro-Wilk test for normality.

Table 3: Shapiro-Wilk test for normality

Family Group		Kolmogorov-Smirnov*			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Scores on N-SLCS	A	.172	24		.922	24	
	C	.065			.066		
	D	.185	21		.954	21	
		.058			.397		
		.269	9		.868	9	
		.059			.118		

* Lilliefors Significance Correction

A = Military deployed family group

C = Intact civilian family group

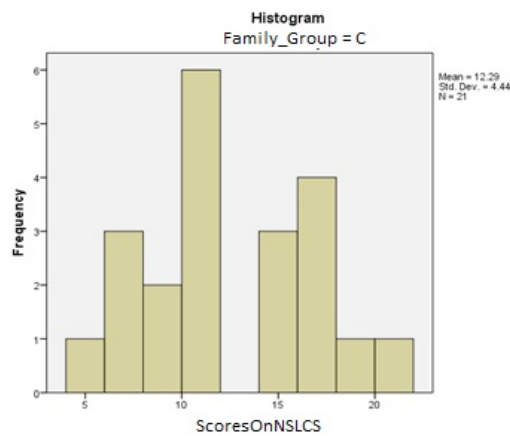
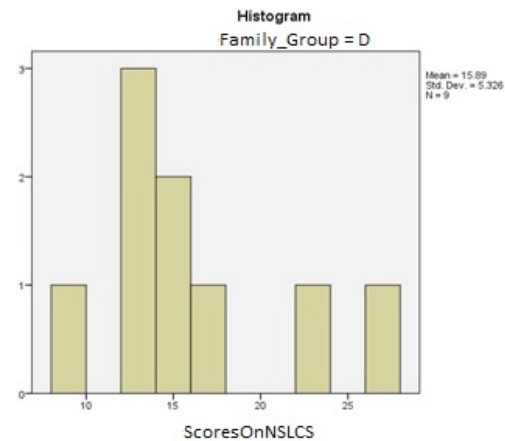
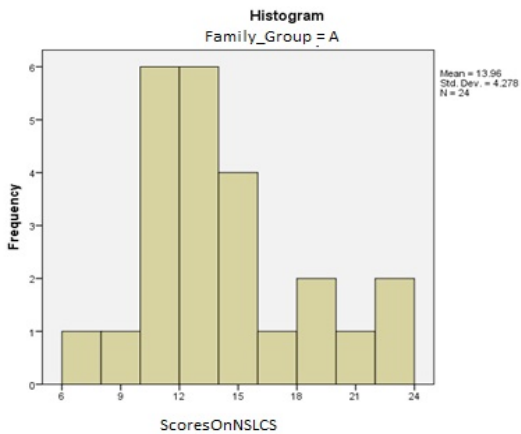
D = Divorced - separated family groups

Table 4: Histograms showing the distribution of the data.

Group A = The military deployed family group

Group C = The intact civilian family group

Group D = The divorced - separated family groups



APPENDIX C

Table 5: Univariate One-Way ANOVA for family groups and scores.

Table 5: Univariate One-Way ANOVA for family groups and scores

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power ^b
Corrected Model	86.460 ^a	2	43.230	2.116	.131	.077	4.231	.414
Intercept	8858.346	1	8858.346	433.511	.000	.895	433.511	1.000
Family Group	86.460	2	43.230	2.116	.131	.077	4.231	.414
Error	1042.133	51	20.434					
Total	11160.000	54						
Corrected Total	1128.593	53						

Dependent Variable: Scores on N-SLCS
 a. R Squared = .077 (Adjusted R Squared = .040)
 b. Computed using alpha = .05

Table 6: Correlation between age and locus of control scores as measured by the *N-SLCS*.

Table 6: Correlation between age and locus of control scores as measured by the *N-SLCS*

Correlations

		Scores on N-SLCS	Age
Scores on N-SLCS Correlation	Pearson	1	-.070
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.617
	N	54	54
Age Correlation	Pearson	-.070	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.617	
	N	54	54

APPENDIX D

Figure 1: *N-SLCS* self-report (first half).

N-SLCS			ID: _____ G: _____
		Please Circle Yes or No for each question as it applies to you	Age _____ Gender _____
Yes	No	1. Do you believe that most problems will solve themselves if you just don't fool with them?	
Yes	No	2. Do you believe that you can stop yourself from catching a cold?	
Yes	No	3. Are some kids just born lucky?	
Yes	No	4. Most of the time do you feel that getting good grades means a great deal to you?	
Yes	No	5. Are you often blamed for things that just aren't your fault?	
Yes	No	6. Do you believe that if somebody studies hard enough he or she can pass any subject?	
Yes	No	7. Do you feel that most of the time it doesn't pay to try hard because things never turn out right anyway?	
Yes	No	8. Do you feel that if things start out well in the morning it's going to be a good day no matter what you do?	
Yes	No	9. Do you feel that most of the time parents listen to what their children have to say?	
Yes	No	10. Do you believe that wishing can make good things happen?	
Yes	No	11. When you get punished does it usually seem it's for no good reason at all?	
Yes	No	12. Most of the time do you find it hard to change a friend's opinion?	
Yes	No	13. Do you think that cheering more than luck helps a team to win?	
Yes	No	14. Do you feel that it's nearly impossible to change your parent's mind about anything?	
Yes	No	15. Do you believe that your parents should allow you to make most of your own decisions?	
Yes	No	16. Do you feel that when you do something wrong there's very little you can do to make it right?	
Yes	No	17. Do you believe that most kids are just born good at sports?	
Yes	No	18. Are most of the other kids your age stronger than you are?	
Yes	No	19. Do you feel that one of the best ways to handle most problems is just not to think about them?	
Yes	No	20. Do you feel that you have a lot of choice in deciding who your friends are?	
Yes	No	21. If you find a four-leaf clover do you believe that it might bring you good luck?	

Figure 1: *N-SLCS* self-report (second half).

N-SLCS

Please circle Yes or No for each question as it applies to you

Yes	No	22. Do you often feel that whether you do your homework has much to do with what kind of grades you get?
Yes	No	23. Do you feel that when a kid your age decides to hit you, there's little you can do to stop him or her?
Yes	No	24. Have you ever had a good luck charm?
Yes	No	25. Do you believe that whether or not people like you depends on how you act?
Yes	No	26. Will your parents usually help you if you ask them?
Yes	No	27. Have you felt that when people were mean to you it was usually for no reason at all?
Yes	No	28. Most of the time, do you feel that that you can change what might happen tomorrow by what you do today?
Yes	No	29. Do you believe that when bad things are going to happen they just are going to happen no matter what you try to do to stop them?
Yes	No	30. Do you think that kids can get their own way if they just keep trying?
Yes	No	31. Most of the time do you find it useless to try to get your own way at home?
Yes	No	32. Do you feel that when good things happen they happen because of hard work?
Yes	No	33. Do you feel that when somebody your age wants to be your enemy there's little you can do to change matters?
Yes	No	34. Do you usually feel that it's easy to get friends to do what you want them to do?
Yes	No	35. Do you usually feel that that you have little to say about what you get to eat at home?
Yes	No	36. Do you feel that when someone that doesn't like you there's little you can do about it?
Yes	No	37. Do you usually feel that it's almost useless to try in school because most other children are just plain smarter than you are?
Yes	No	38. Are you the kind of person who believes that planning ahead makes things turn out better?
Yes	No	39. Most of the time, do you feel that you have little to say about what your family decides to do?
Yes	No	40. Do you think it's better to be smart than to be lucky?

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