



# COVID-19 conversations: A qualitative study of majority Hispanic/Latinx youth experiences during early stages of the pandemic

L. Cortés-García<sup>1</sup> · J. Hernández Ortiz<sup>2</sup> · N. Asim<sup>2</sup> · M. Sales<sup>3</sup> · R. Villareal<sup>3</sup> · F. Penner<sup>2</sup> · C. Sharp<sup>2,4</sup>

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## Abstract

**Background** Growing evidence informs about the detrimental impact that COVID-19 has had on youths' mental health and well-being. As of yet, no study has directly examined the experiences and perspectives of children and young adolescents from racial and ethnic minority groups in the U.S., despite being exposed to more adversity, which may affect coping with the many challenges posed by the pandemic.

**Objective** This study aimed to give voice to a mostly Hispanic/Latinx group of youth regarding the impact of COVID-19 stay-at-home measures and to identify their emotional responses and coping strategies amid the pandemic in the U.S. when restrictions were at their hardest.

**Method** A total of 17 youths (70.6% Hispanic; age range=10–14 years; 52.9% female) participated in four virtual semi-structured focus groups for each grade level (grades 5–8). Data was transcribed and analyzed using a gold standard thematic analysis approach.

**Results** Seven themes were identified concerning the impact of COVID-19, centering around the impact of racism, loss of income, the role of community and family in coping with stress, information overload, home-schooling, loneliness and boredom, and lack of structured routines.

**Conclusions** Our findings suggest that cultural factors (e.g., collectivism and familism) in Hispanic communities may offer important buffering during COVID-19. Future research studies evaluating the implementation of structured programs that provide a space to talk about emotions and thoughts related to the impact of the pandemic and training in strategies to cope with distress during mandatory home-schooling are needed.

**Keywords** COVID-19 pandemic · Youth · Hispanic · Stay-at-home measures · Home-schooling · Qualitative

## Introduction

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is considered a public health crisis and has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). The spread of COVID-19 during the past year has resulted in detrimental physical and psychological consequences for millions of people worldwide (WHO, 2020). Most countries have implemented social distancing and stay-at-home measures to prevent the spread of infection, ease the pressure on the health care system, and protect at-risk populations (e.g., Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Golberstein et al., 2020). Although these measures and efforts are highly commendable and necessary, it appears that the resulting confluence of economic, health, and educational disruptions will nonetheless have both immediate and long-lasting adverse effects on the general population (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Settersten et al., 2020), and more specifically on young populations (Golberstein et al., 2020; Gruber et al., 2020).

In this regard, the transition from middle childhood to adolescence might be a susceptible period of development when considering the impact of COVID-19 in different domains (Benner & Mistry, 2020; Gruber et al., 2020). It is well-known that this developmental period involves multiple biopsychosocial changes, which occur more or less simultaneously (Cicchetti & Toth, 2009), and, therefore, individuals during this period are more susceptible to develop various mental health problems (Casey et al., 2010; Kessler et al., 2005). Additionally, such adverse effects might be even worse among those who are already marginalized and have faced significant stressors in their pre-pandemic lives (i.e., youth from racial and ethnic minority groups and low-income families). For that reason, these youths are at a greater disadvantage in coping with the many challenges posed by the pandemic (Benner & Mistry, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Given that the pandemic will likely continue to persist for many months, if not years, it is crucial to identify risk and protective factors to inform prevention and intervention efforts that mitigate its detrimental impact among at-risk children and adolescents in the United States (U.S.). A better understanding of the experience of the pandemic as perceived by youth themselves would potentially contribute to the development of prevention and intervention strategies for related abrupt disruptions of normal routines.

In the present context of the pandemic, one of the greatest disruptions to the lives of youth relates to the closure of schools (Loades et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). After the declaration of COVID-19 as a national emergency in the U.S. (White House, 2020), nearly 60 million students attending schools were abruptly transitioned to remote learning within a matter of weeks (Becker et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Children and adolescents were forced to keep a prolonged state of physical isolation from their peers, teachers, extended families, and community networks (Loades et al., 2020; Oosterhoff et al., 2020). To date, numerous rapid reviews of the literature have gathered evidence about the impact of COVID-19 on children and adolescents' mental health and well-being (e.g., Fegert et al., 2020; Golberstein et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Taken together, such emerging evidence shows that prolonged homeschooling and stay-at-home measures results in social isolation and loneliness (Loades et al., 2020), which negatively impacts the development of children and adolescents' within multiple facets, such as in their school performance (Becker et al., 2020; Reich et al., 2020), physical health (Jiao et al., 2020; Jiloha, 2020) and psychosocial functioning (e.g., Duan

et al., 2020; Orgiles, 2020; Seçer & Ulaş, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). It should be noted that the vast majority of studies about the impact of COVID-19 on youths' mental health and well-being so far were quantitative and mainly used surveys and questionnaires to gather information from youth and their families.

Furthermore, it should be noted that studies among children and adolescents from racial and ethnic minority groups and low-income families have been severely neglected. This is despite the fact that the COVID-19 related impact might be even greater within these populations—not surprisingly, as they are already negatively affected by health and social disparities, which are likely to be further exacerbated due to the pandemic (e.g., Benner & Mistry, 2020; Fegert et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). For instance, according to reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), there has been a higher burden of COVID-19 illness and death among racial and ethnic minority groups in the U.S. Particularly, Hispanics/Latinx, one of the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the U.S. (Colby & Ortman, 2015), have faced disproportionate health and economic impacts from the pandemic (e.g., Riley et al., 2021; Vargas & Sanchez, 2020). Moreover, there is evidence showing higher levels of psychological distress among Hispanic/Latinx adults relative to other racial/ethnic groups during COVID-19 (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; McGinty et al., 2020). Among youth, there is robust evidence indicating that Hispanic/Latinx youth experience significant social and health disparities compared to White peers (Flores, 2010; Raymond-Flesch, 2017) and that such disparities are especially prominent during early adolescence (i.e., beginning at age 10) (Wallander et al., 2019). However, to date, it is unknown how Hispanics/Latinx youth transitioning from middle childhood to adolescence are facing the consequences of the pandemic from their perspective.

Furthermore, youth from low-income households may not live in conditions suitable for homeschooling and may not have access to necessary resources such as computers and a reliable internet connection. This in turn can negatively affect their learning outcomes, resulting in increased stress and family conflicts (Becker et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). It should be acknowledged that youth and families from low socio-economic backgrounds rely most heavily on school-based services for their nutritional, physical, and mental health needs (Fegert et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has yet directly examined the experiences and perspectives of young adolescents from racial and ethnic minority groups in the U.S., particularly among Hispanics/Latinx. This research is highly important to prevent the current health crisis from resulting in long-lasting consequences for youth from low-income families and from widening social disparities (Fegert et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020).

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), it is highly important to hear children's voices first-hand in matters that affect their lives (Robinson, 2014; Urbina-Garcia & Urbina-Garcia, 2019). Listening to youths' own voice and experience is fundamental to identify and understand their true needs and problems (Camarota et al., 2010; Livingstone et al., 2014). In this regard, studies including qualitative data derived from direct interviews about COVID-19 with young people are warranted. These studies provide a rich, detailed picture to be built up about how and why youths would respond in certain ways to the pandemic, their feelings and thoughts about it, and how they have been coping with such an unprecedented situation (Branquinho et al., 2020).

To date though, only very few studies have taken such perspectives into account when exploring the impact of COVID-19 on youths' lives during the lockdown. Mondragon et al.,

(2020) showed that the lockdown protocols in Spain had a considerable impact on children's wellbeing, not only at a psychological level (e.g., sadness, worry, and boredom) but also in social (e.g., loneliness derived from not being able to meet their peers) and physical (e.g., increased sedentarism) terms. Through the use of qualitative data, this research was able to identify particular needs of the children (e.g., physical activity). However, this study relied on information reported through the caregivers instead of obtaining information by having direct conversations with the children. Through the use of a mixed-method approach, Fitzpatrick and colleagues (2020) found a significant increase in mental health problems (i.e., depressive and anxiety symptoms) among a US sample of caregivers and their children (between 0 and 19 years old). This research was also able to identify particular needs and mental problems of children during the pandemic. However, it should be noted that this study was based on self-reported data and qualitative information reported by caregivers.

The present qualitative study aimed to give voice to the lived experience during the pandemic outbreak of a sample of 10 to 14-year-old youths, most of whom are Hispanic/Latinx. Our goals were to identify the different needs and concerns viewed from their perspective amid the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S. when restrictions were at their hardest. We utilized a qualitative methodology to analyze youths' narratives. A qualitative analytical approach was selected as it allows researchers to gain insight and elicit exploration within an under-researched community and area of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Willig, 2012). Moreover, as the effect of COVID-19 is a new phenomenon, qualitative approaches are relevant as an exploratory phase. Such knowledge is of critical importance to inform the design of specific strategies and tools that will ultimately help at-risk youths to overcome these unprecedented circumstances coupled with the multiple challenges inherent in this developmental period. In line with previous findings, we could expect to find a detrimental impact of the pandemic in the psychosocial functioning and wellbeing of the participants. However, as this is a novel understudied question, our approach is inductive and the form of our thematic analysis is data-driven, we did not hold any more a priori expectations.

## Method

### Participants

As part of follow-up data collection at [Blinded for review] during COVID-19, roughly five teens from each grade level (grades 5–8) were randomly selected to participate in a focus group. Five fifth graders, four sixth graders, three seventh graders, and five eighth graders accepted and participated in the respective focus group. A total of 17 youths voluntarily participated in this study in May of 2020. Information about participants by age group is described in Table 1. Our participants' ages ranged from 10 to 14 years. As previously mentioned, they were transitioning from middle childhood to adolescence, and, according to Steinberg (2005), this developmental period can be defined as early adolescence. However, due to the multiple and diverse conceptualizations of individuals covering this age range, in the present study, we refer to our participants using the broader term of "youth". We thus distinguished between younger (10–12, years old; 5th and 6th graders) vs. older (12 to 14 years old; 7th and 8th graders) participants when more specificity was required. All participants in the focus groups were students enrolled in the Socio-Emotional Learning

**Table 1** Focus Group Characteristics

	5th Grade (n=5)	6th Grade (n=4)	7th Grade (n=3)	8th Grade (n=5)
Age range	10–11	11–12	12–13	13–14
Sex				
1. Female	2	2	2	3
2. Male	3	2	1	2
Race/ethnicity				
1. Hispanic	4	3	2	3
2. Black or African American	0	1	1	2
3. Middle Eastern	1	0	0	0
Interview duration (minutes:seconds).	39:56	56:02	58:05	40:44

(SEL) Program in partnership with the school, which is a partnership between a non-profit organization and the school and operates under the protection of consent forms through the school. The SEL program aims to regularly capture “student voice” in various ways, including through student and community expressions, journaling, responsive classroom lessons, and individual/group (non-clinical) interventions. The focus groups were designed to help the school better understand students’ perspectives and potential socio-emotional needs during the COVID-19 health crisis.

Participants attend a public middle school in a large city in the Southwestern U.S. The school is located in the city’s most densely populated neighborhood, which is largely made up of residents of Latin American heritage, many recently immigrated. The neighborhood had a median family income of \$29,124 in 2017, \$20,000 less than the city average. The age range of the participants was 10–14 years. Of the sample, 52.9% (n=9) were female and 47.1% (n=8) were male. The racial/ethnic breakdown was 70.6% (n=12) Hispanic/Latinx, 23.5% (n=4) Black or African American, and 5.9% (n=1) Middle Eastern.

## Procedure and Measures

Once potential students were selected for participation, their teacher approached them in their virtual classroom and gauged their interest in participating. If students indicated they were interested, teachers contacted parents via phone calls to obtain verbal/oral parental permission. If students were not interested, parents were not contacted for parental permission. Students and parents were explained that this participation was an effort to better understand the experiences of youth during the pandemic and that all participation was voluntary. Once parental permission was obtained, focus groups were scheduled according to students’ availability. Prior to conducting the study, all procedures outlined here were submitted for review to the appropriate Institutional Review Board in charge of ensuring ethical research with human subjects within the institution. The Institutional Review Board approved the study, deeming all procedures ethical and acceptable to conduct with the students.

Semi-structured group interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom by personnel of the organization partnered with the school as part of the school’s existing SEL Program. The interviewer (co-author MS) was a Hispanic female who was a former educator. She has years of experience working with students in marginalized communities and currently works with the non-profit helping lead the SEL program. The interviewer introduced herself

and explained her role with the SEL program. The interviewer also explained the focus group as an opportunity for the school, teachers, and community to learn more about how the pandemic was impacting the students. The interviewer did not have a previously established relationship with the students and the teachers were present to make the students feel at ease. However, the teachers did not play an active role in the focus groups. In the case of severe emotional distress, a psychologist was available by call. A total of four focus group interviews were conducted in English and were audio-recorded. Focus groups were conducted by grade. Audio files were stored in a secure data drive only accessible to the research team. Due to the time and resource constraints, the researchers opted for focus groups instead of individual interviews for feasibility purposes, also in acknowledgment of the value of peer support associated with focus groups (Heary & Hennessy, 2002, 2006). In addition, this study aimed to understand the collective experiences of these youth, which was obtainable using focus groups.

Focus group questions were formulated based on emerging literature at the time about the impact of the pandemic. During the conceptualization of this study, emerging literature suggested the pandemic had the potential to impact youth's mental health (e.g., Clemens et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2020); impact family functioning and financial situations (Cluver et al., 2020; Penner et al., 2021; Prime et al., 2020); and disproportionately affect marginalized communities (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020;). There was also concern raised about exposure to media coverage of the pandemic (Cluver et al., 2020). The questions included in the interview were the following: (1) Since the Coronavirus pandemic, do you feel you have been treated worse than, the same as, or better than people of other races? (2) Has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your family's money situation in any way? If so in what ways? (3) Have you been following the media on the Coronavirus pandemic? If so, how much? What has been the impact of the amount you followed the media? What kind of help would you like from the medical service providers? (4) How has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your mental health? (5) How has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your family functioning? (6) What has helped you cope with the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic? The interviewer framed the focus groups as a "virtual table" for students to share their voices. They were encouraged to share as much or as little as they liked, and the interviewer explained to them that the purpose of the "virtual table" was to provide a better understanding of how the pandemic was impacting them. The interviewer adapted and expanded on the questions appropriately according to the grade level of each focus group. For example, for question 2, fifth graders were asked whether they had experienced anyone in their family stop working or work less than before the pandemic; and for question 4, they were asked how the pandemic had impacted their emotions. The interviewer listened to the participants' statements carefully, guided, and asked questions appropriately according to the interview outlines. The interviewees were not interrupted during the interview unless they deviated from the main subject of the communication. The interviews were ended once all content in the interview outline was fulfilled. The general duration of the interviews was approximately 40–60 min. The interview questions were not pilot tested prior to the study and field notes were not made. Repeated focus groups were not carried out. All participants received information about the procedure of the investigation, and their parents gave their consent before participating in the study. IRB approval was obtained for all study procedures.

Regarding reflexivity, both coders are of Hispanic background and both experienced the strict lockdown consequences. Concretely, the first author has Spanish/Colombian back-

ground, and as such, she has also internalized Hispanic values such as *familism*. By the time of the pandemic outbreak, she also experienced strict lockdown, so she abruptly transitioned to online work and social isolation. The second author similarly experienced the abrupt transition to online learning that the students in the study did. In terms of background and cultural values, as someone from an immigrant family with strong traditional Mexican values, she also experienced isolation from her nuclear and extended family which was very difficult in the early stages of the pandemic. The authors acknowledge that carrying all their personal experiences, whether similar or different, provided them with an insider perspective when working with the data. Thus, the authors used conscious reflexivity during the data analytic process, which allowed for an enhanced understanding of the data.

## Data Analysis

Four research assistants each transcribed an individual focus group audio file to prepare the data for qualitative analysis. Particularly, a thematic analysis according to the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was carried out by two co-authors (LCG and JHO). This analytical approach requires repeatedly reviewing data and moving fluidly through the stages of analysis in order to identify the central ideas (“themes”) for each group (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the present study, we adhered to the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) checklist. A major strength of thematic analysis is its flexibility, that is, researchers are not bound to any epistemological, theoretical, or rigidly structured way of conducting their thematic analysis; instead, it can be adapted to match the needs of the research, and importantly, the actual content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, following an inductive approach, themes were derived from the data and not in advance (Willig, 2012). The process comprised the following six stages. First, we immersed ourselves in the reading and re-reading of the youth experiences related to the pandemic to become familiar with the narrative content, noting down preliminary ideas and thoughts. Second, once we were familiarized with the data, we started coding interesting features of the data systematically (highlighting in different colors and adding comments through the function “Comment” in Word) across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code (e.g., missing their friends; feelings of loneliness and sadness; worrying about grades). Third, we clustered the numerous codes into potential themes, at a broader level, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Fourth, we reviewed the candidate themes (initially six themes), that is, we examined themes to ascertain relevance to coded units and determined if potential themes were meaningful within the context of the overall data set. Fifth, through repeated analysis, and reference to overall data and codes, and via discussions between the coders, we refined and generated clear definitions and descriptions for themes. In this stage, we decided to include a seventh distinguishable theme related to the value of the family. Finally, we wrote the report that captures the analysis findings. Of note, discordances on the coding were analyzed, and disagreements were resolved via discussion.

Due to the small number of transcripts and coding team, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was not used, and coding was carried out directly on the transcripts. Concretely, the coding was hand-performed, aided by highlighting in different colors and indexing codes through the “Comment” function in Microsoft Word (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020). Importantly, this coding process fostered reflexivity and continuous dialogue within

the research team. Transcripts were not returned to participants for correction and participants did not provide feedback.

## Results

The current study revealed seven major themes related to the youths' experience of virtual learning from home, stay-at-home measures, and social distancing that emerged during the pandemic outbreak. Exemplar quotes from the participants are included for each theme.

### Perceptions on the Impact of Racism During COVID-19

The different perceptions of the youths on whether they have been treated differently during the pandemic for belonging to minority racial and ethnic groups and also whether they are aware of disparities in the system related to race were analyzed. It was found that, among fifth graders, most of them did not report noticing any differences in the way they were treated based on their race or ethnicity in the context of the pandemic. However, their responses also suggested a lack of understanding of the question.

I feel I've been treated the same because since the Coronavirus all of my family we've been in quarantine and my aunt she works at a hospital and they still give her like a mask and gloves and a face shield and stuff to protect herself and if they would've like not treated everybody the same, she wouldn't get as much protection because she's just a nurse and the doctors I think they treat them the same (5th grader; 10–11-year-old)

Every time I go to the barbershop with my dad, we have to wear a mask cause there's some people around and when it's time to get into the chair you have to take the mask and then just get on to get your haircut and then you get off and you have to put on a mask (5th grader; 10–11-year-old)

Older participants' responses were broader and deeper, showing that they were aware of racism in society and its negative consequences. Many wanted to share the potential reasons why the pandemic would have had a more severe and widespread impact on Hispanics and African Americans in the US. Importantly though, none of them expressed the belief that racism was present within the context of the virus in their community and considered that everyone had been treated equally.

I think that since most of us are American, and some of us are not [...] I think we have all been treated the same. The only thing that I think have been treating the same different is like people who are working in the medical field (7th grader; 12–13-year-old)

During this ... hard time I feel like we've been more together than we have ever and no one really thinks about racism and discrimination that much (6th grader; 11–12-year-old)

Based on their knowledge on the virus, youth suggested that their different genetics and other environmental factors may have contributed to health disparities exposed during the



pandemic. They considered that other communities could be better equipped to protect themselves against the virus than racial minorities, and/or could have more safety measures such as social distancing implemented. Additionally, they suggested that their buildings might be smaller and in worse conditions so people might be unable to effectively social distance.

... people of color as myself and Hispanics our communities and compare them with ... white peoples communities I feel like they're in a better state than us in our communities and that's why, like ... in my community, we're really close to each other but I feel like they're more distant, the other communities. [...] The buildings from my community are more smaller and like tighter to each other and so is the people, like there's a little bit more people in my community, and others have a smaller space (6th grader; 11–12-year-old)

Also, some considered that this differential impact could be because of the manner in which they live. For instance, one young person mentioned that they hold gatherings and parties more often which made it more difficult to maintain social distancing.

I also heard that on the news and I feel like they said [...] Hispanics like to party and ... everyone likes to party but like we like it more, we party for anything, that's why they also said that because we get together so people come from other places and you don't know where they have been, or who have they been in contact with (7th grader; 12–13-year-old)

From the viewpoint of eighth graders, Hispanics and African American communities were more likely to contract the virus as they didn't have access to an adequate healthcare system.

They're always treated unequal ... because they, they have pre-existing conditions, but they can't be treated because they don't have Medicaid or something or they don't have hospitals in the area (8th grader; 13–14-year-old)

## Summary

Older youth were more aware of the negative impact of COVID-19 related to race. Older participants reported noticing disparities in society and indicated that communities from racial minorities may experience a more detrimental impact for multiple reasons, though largely because of having less access to the healthcare system and other resources to face COVID-19. Nevertheless, none of them reported having directly experienced this detrimental impact as a result of racial health disparities.

## Losing Income, Finding Community

Perceptions from the youth on the economic impact related to the pandemic were identified. Overall, participants were aware that, as a result of restrictions due to COVID-19, some family members become unemployed or temporarily laid off, and that this had an impact on their families' economy. In fact, at every grade level, participants reported about at least one family member having lost their job, working fewer hours, or more hours—in order to

compensate other family member's job loss—, living from savings and/or relying on the food bank or local church.

The negative impact is that my mom, she doesn't have enough money to be spending on food that much, so she has to have a budget to spend and, sometimes ... she has to pay late for rent (5th grader; 10–11-year-old)

There were some cases where students were unable to report on the economic situation at their homes. However, two of them stated that their parents reassured them when they asked about it.

I guess it's ... my family ... they don't really worry about it too much, they saved the stimulus checks actually have helped them some, but yeah they just don't like really stress over it a lot, which like makes me feel like more relieved about it, like we're not going to like starve to death or something (6th grader; 11–12-year-old)

Interestingly, many believed that, despite the financial issues of families in their community, people helped each other much more than before the pandemic. Participants were aware of the economic issues that some neighbors were experiencing, noticed that many people had lost their jobs, and although they needed food, they could not afford to purchase groceries. In response to this, one student commented that their family offered their help to others. Also, extended family members (i.e., uncles, cousins) were identified as an important source of support. Youth considered that offering support to those in need was an important part of belonging to a community.

My church members ... some of them outside like getting the food, and me and my sister help put the bags and the onions and cabbage and stuff and putting it in a box (7th grader; 12–13-year-old)

I feel like I would ask for help because I'll probably be homeless, I have a lot of family and friends that help. ... They have helped us and we have helped them. So I feel like it would be the same (8th grader; 13–14-year-old)

## Summary

Most of the youths informed the group about at least one close family member having lost their jobs, getting less income at home, and relying on the food bank. Although participants were able to discuss the existence of disparities in society and even raise concerns about the financial issues within their families, they also placed emphasis on providing more help to others than before the pandemic, discussing that during difficult times they rely on the members of the community and bond together.

## Information Overload

In this rapidly changing situation, it was remarkable that the media became entirely dominated by the pandemic outbreak. As such, youth indicated that they were exposed to large amounts of information and noticed the resulting high levels of stress in the adults around them. The majority reported watching the news on the TV with their families, but this was

coupled with feeling overwhelmed and complaints about the amount of relayed information about the virus.

Every day it gives me like 3 notifications about news and to ... not to get the notifications anymore—I have to go in and check what the news is about and like all of them—this whole month—they're all like the Coronavirus (5th grader; 10–11-year-old)

Most of the participants appreciated receiving information and gaining an understanding of the current circumstances, and they considered it important to keep people well-informed. They sometimes reported feeling sadness related to the virus' consequences and worry about the possibility that a family member—particularly grandparents—could get infected, but they continued to maintain hope for the vaccines.

Sometimes, it's a bit more negative considering the amount of people that have died and more people that have coronavirus, but sometimes it's a little bit more positive considering that there might be some theories about vaccines and stuff that we could use to prevent the coronavirus (6th grader; 11–12-year-old)

Some participants reported no specific impact on themselves but the adults around them, becoming remarkably more worried and scared. One young person even reported that his/her family stopped watching the TV news because of the possibility that the news was *filling their minds with fear*. Some considered that watching the TV news made them feel stressed while others tried not to think about it too much and distracted themselves.

We don't watch the news, but we still get informed ... because I just don't want to think about it because sometimes it can get into people's minds and it could make you a little stressed out or I don't know (7th grader; 12–13-year-old)

## Summary

Most of the youths felt overwhelmed by the amount of information released in the media concerning the virus, especially in TV news broadcasts. Most of them indicated that their relatives also experienced similar emotions regarding the news. Importantly, some youths reported having disturbed feelings and try to avoid listening to the news. However, most of them wanted to remain informed.

## Learning from Home

Another predominant theme in the focus groups was the impact of the transition to online learning at home as a safety measure against COVID-19. In general, participants at every grade level expressed their dissatisfaction with homeschooling and half of the kids believed they were not being academically successful. Youth reported missing different elements of the traditional learning environment including interacting with their classmates, physically attending school, and having the opportunity to complete their homework at school. They believed that online classes had a negative impact on their learning process because they were not able to contact teachers as much and got easily distracted at home. As a result, students often felt insecure about their understanding of the subject material. Additionally,

a small subset of students also reported that they had to deal with poor internet connection at home.

I work better in the classroom. When I'm in the classroom, I get A's and B's. [...] It's affected me because I'm not having very good grades because of corona and this online learning stuff and so I would- I would prefer- I would prefer learning in the classroom than online (5th grader; 10–11-year-old)

And then when I get on, there's nothing, and ... nobody has posted and the next thing you know, ... I'm on my phone and then they go back to google classroom and all the teachers have posted, and I'm just like wait what? And then like I get confused and then I get easily distracted now that I'm home (6th grader; 11–12-year-old)

In addition to the transition to online learning at home, some youth reported added responsibilities including taking care of younger siblings and housework because of their parents' workload. These added responsibilities potentially interfere with their school performance, resulting in overwhelming feelings.

I do. I help my brother a little bit. He doesn't like doing his homework. He's so lazy. He wakes up early he wakes me up, and I'm like okay, I will stop my homework, I will give you the iPad to work while I use the laptop and then he goes, "ughhh" and he's just, he's a lot (8th grader; 13–14-year-old)

Remarkably, among eighth graders, a strong negative feeling like some part of their lives had been stolen due to pandemic restrictions was unanimous. They lamented not interacting with their teachers and classmates and believed that the transition to high school would be harder not only because they wouldn't have the opportunity to say goodbye to their classmates, but also because they would carry with them doubts about the different contents of the subjects.

And especially if school doesn't start in August for high school because as [student name] said some of us are going to other high schools, so it's going to be like your first time in that high school and it's not just going to school it's your first time you change to high school, it'll be more difficult for you to understand the lessons because you haven't been—like you haven't seen—you haven't met your teachers but also it impacts your learning if you don't understand something. Yes, you have the internet and all of that but also some of us, I will put myself too, and I like it when the teacher is standing right beside you when you don't understand something (8th grader; 13–14-year-old)

## Summary

The majority of the youths considered that completing school virtually from home had a negative impact on their learning process. They expressed missing doing their work at school and interacting and addressing confusion with their teachers in person. Half of them also stated getting easily distracted at home, resulting in less concentration to do their tasks (e.g., eating snacks, not structured schedule, taking care of their siblings). A few of them reported procrastinating on their schoolwork and decreased motivation.

## Impact on Psychosocial Functioning

Social distancing and home confinement were unpleasant and distressing experiences for all participants. A common need expressed by them was to stay connected with family and friends. The fact of being confined at home resulted in feelings of loneliness, boredom and sadness because they could not see their friends and relatives as frequently. Some participants indicated being afraid that this could impact detrimentally their friendships.

I would say I've been feeling pretty lonely because normally when I'm at school, I have like more friends that that I'm with and I have people that I can talk to, people that I can trust but now that I'm at home, ... I don't really talk to them as much as I used to and since I'm the only child I really don't have anybody to talk to (6th grader; 11–12-year-old)

Fears about a family member (e.g., grandparents) being infected were also found among students. Some participants reported feeling worried about their mothers going back to work eventually as they could be more exposed to the virus (e.g., hospitals, restaurants, clothes stores). They were scared about what could happen to them.

And then another thing is that my mum is working for like, she's still working, she's working as a housekeeper, she works as a rich housekeeper, and they are basically 78 years old and I am kind of afraid that she might catch it or not (7th grader; 12–13-year-old)

Some participants also expressed regret and sadness at not being able to participate in important cultural traditions (i.e., baptism of a cousin and end of Ramadan). In addition to being important cultural celebrations, those celebrations were typically an important avenue of connection with other members of their community and their families.

The disruption of their usual routines produced two different outcomes. On the one hand, youth reported less daily stress associated with school (e.g., no need to get up very early to be on time at school). However, this opened up additional unstructured time that could be filled with thoughts of uncertainty, boredom, and frustration. Among the youngest group, the ability to eat snacks and wake up at any time to do their homework was seen as positive. One sixth grade student reported having sleeping problems and expressed concern about coping with the sleeping problems once they return to school.

The virus has affected me mentally because I'm just really bored that's it. I don't feel stressed or anything I'm just bored I don't know why. Like, I literally count the dots on my ceiling (8th grader; 13–14-year-old)

Importantly, there were stark differences between the perceptions of the fifth and eighth graders; while the youngest expressed also feelings of happiness and joy because they remained at home and could play more often and longer, the eighth graders were angry about the consequences of the pandemic (e.g., canceling school trip) and how these were going to affect their social relationships. They stated feeling as one of the most important parts of their lives (i.e., social life) had been taken away from them.

I would feel like we were robbed or something [...] cause like we went to [names school] for like 4 years and we were finally the oldest and we didn't get to experience

the same things that the other 8th graders got to experience last year [...] and this this was the one year where we had together (8th grader; 13–14-year-old)

## Summary

Overall, youth reported mixed emotions regarding their psychosocial functioning during the pandemic. On one hand, younger participants reported feelings of happiness and joy of being at home with their families and being less stressed. They appreciated having extra time to spend in other activities such as playing outdoors and at home. On the other hand, youths also reported feelings of loneliness, sadness and boredom connected with the lack of socializing with friends and other family members (e.g., grandparents, cousins). Additionally, some of them reported having sleeping troubles (e.g., getting up late in the morning, difficulties in falling asleep), and changes in their eating habits (e.g., eating snacks whenever they could). Given these changes, it seems that not being able to socialize as much as before has impacted the youth's mood and the lack of a structured routine has affected their eating and sleeping habits.

## Valuing Family

Even though school closure, financial issues, and parent's work reschedules or loss had impacted youth' and families' daily routines, the majority did not report significant changes in the family functioning. In fact, based on youth's voices across the different groups, it was evident that family represented the pillar in their life. They illustrated that despite all the disruptions and adjustments (e.g., taking care of younger siblings, being watched by older cousins, staying at home without parents), families remained bonded, closer, and helping each other even more than before.

I think that the money situation is kind of not the same, it's definitely gone down cause my mom lost two weeks of work. And the hours aren't going well. But everything is fine cause we are in my aunt's house so we are helping them also and they are helping us (7th grader; 11–12-year-old)

Having extra time at home with family, parents, and siblings was very valuable among youth. Particularly, half of them highlighted the importance of spending more time with their mothers. Although they also regret not being able to play with their friends, staying at home more had proven to be a great opportunity for them to get closer to their siblings despite the age differences (e.g., helping them doing homework, playing) and to their parents. Participants lamented the lack of physical contact with their extended families and realized that they had always taken time with their family for granted and now they were looking forward to seeing cousins, grandparents, etc.

Most of the time, when all of us are like going outside taken for granted I feel like I just miss going to see my family (8th grader; 13–14-year-old)

In a contrasting situation, a few students indicated that conflicts at home increased during the lockdown. For instance, in some cases arguments between siblings were more recurrent. One sixth grader indicated that having a backyard had resulted in having to host all the extended family and the limited space caused them to fight more often. For another student,

sleeping problems that involved getting up very late and having an unstable schedule made his parents angry and mad towards him.

Before Coronavirus, there's a lot of things to do and you could- you could do a lot of things but since ... Coronavirus happened and shut down, me and my brother ... picking at each other more than usual so yeah. (5th grader; 10–11-year-old)

## Summary

The majority of youth did not report any significant difficulties in family relationships during the pandemic, and on the contrary, they showed a strong sense of relatedness and family connection. Most of them appreciated the opportunity to spend more time with their parents and siblings than before the pandemic. Importantly, based on the youths' testimonies, it seems that families were able to ensure a safe haven and secure base for the youths despite all the financial difficulties. In general, youth were grateful for having time with their families. They felt safe at home and enjoyed having someone to talk with.

## Coping with COVID-19

Not surprisingly, participants across the different grades reported finding support within their families. Particularly the figure of the mother was considered the most relevant when coping with distress and other negative emotions. Direct conversations mother-child were identified as the main source of support.

Um we talk to each other and...and over my feelings and she helps me out by saying things that I should do to not feel like that or feel angry or fighting (5th grader; 10–11-year-old)

Videogames and my family because I don't really play with anyone on videogames so I just go on and find people and talk with them and ... just relate with them on what's happening, and other than that, it's just my family staying together with my little sisters and my parents, you know like just bonding together, playing around (6th grader; 11–12-year-old)

In addition to the family support, talking with friends and teachers on video calls was indicated as very helpful to remained connected. Most of them used Facetime or WhatsApp as the main tools to communicate with each other.

For me it's stress because with everything that is happening my mom and I also feel like I've been like calling my family more often, so I feel like that's going to help me coping with like my generation a lot, because we have FaceTime snapchat and tiktok so I feel like it helps us a lot (8th grader; 13–14-year-old)

I Facetime my friends, and we can really see each other, cause we have to do social distancing, so like we have our own group chats and everything (7th grader; 12–13-year-old)

In addition to relying on a connection to family and friends to cope, many youths also reported other activities that helped manage their stress and feelings. Practicing breathing when feeling stressed was also reported by one participant. Origami and playing with pets were also identified as a way to manage their emotions. Additionally, exercising, riding bikes, listening to music or drawing helped them to not get bored across the different groups. Screen time increased among youth, especially among 7th and 8th graders. The majority reported playing video games, watching movies and other TV shows as a way to make *time go by faster* and also using apps such as TikTok to keep themselves busy.

Other participants found it useful to minimize the situation. A few of them considered it helpful to think that their families and beloved ones are well and to be more focused on the moment. One young person (8th grader) appreciated having his own space at home as it gave him the opportunity to deal better with his emotions of feeling alone and isolated.

## Summary

Despite disruptions in their daily life and the lack of social interactions, youth reported using a variety of coping skills that helped to deal with stress. For instance, youth were able to recognize their emotions and talk about them with their loved ones. Such skills could be the result of providing youth with socio-emotional learning instruction through the partnership between the non-profit organization and the school, which continued through the COVID-19 period. Parents were identified as the closest and best resource for youths to seek help from during social isolation. The continuation of close and open communication about the youths' needs with their mothers comforted them. Some youths mentioned using breathing to relax and outdoor activities whenever possible. The use of video chatting (e.g., FaceTime) and social media (e.g., TikTok), especially among the oldest, was identified as a useful tool to remain connected with peers and family members and provided the needed social support. Finally, videogames and watching TV were also highly recurrent among these youths.

## Discussion

This study is the first qualitative study to directly investigate the impact of the pandemic in a US sample of 10–14-year-old youth who were majority Hispanic/Latinx, capturing their own voice and perspective during home-schooling. A total of seven themes were identified concerning the impact of COVID-19: perceptions of the impact of racism during COVID-19; losing income, finding community; information overload; learning from home; impact on psychosocial functioning; valuing family; coping with COVID-19. Overall, youths were not indifferent to the pandemic. They experienced a significant interruption in their routines, leaving them with extra time and less daily stress, but also room for other concerns about the spread of the virus and feelings of sadness, loneliness, and boredom connected to the lack of socialization.

Regarding theme one (perception of the impact of racism), youth from older groups (i.e., 6th and 7th grades) showed more awareness that COVID-19 has had a harsher impact among minority communities in terms of both health and financial losses, and most youths in the group reported financial impact in their own family in terms of loss of job, less



income, or increased use of food banks. Such findings suggest that certain ethnic or racial groups, especially Hispanic/Latinx, are more likely to experience a job loss or a harder financial impact related to the pandemic in the US (CDC, 2021; Stark et al., 2020).

Regarding theme two (losing income, finding community), participants also shared that members of their community were able to help each other during the stress of the pandemic. These characteristics included a strong sense of belongingness and social connection in the community that may reflect *collectivism* (i.e., placing the needs and objectives of the community over the specific needs of the individual; Gallo et al., 2009), which can serve as a buffer against the negative impact of COVID-19 among these communities (Oyserman et al., 2002; Penner et al., 2021). In this regard, having a sense of belongingness may be critical for Hispanic/Latinx' wellness given the importance of close relationships with family and community members in their psychological functioning (e.g., Villarreal et al., 2005). A large body of work has shown that individuals with higher feelings of belongingness to the group have greater well-being (i.e., increased self-esteem and life satisfaction, lower depressive symptoms, and improved cognitive health) than those with a lower sense of group belongingness (Jetten et al., 2015). Indeed, the internalization of group belongingness is of key importance because it provides a cognitive framework for understanding social reality and one's place in the world (Cobb et al., 2019). Empirical research has found the positive effects of belongingness among Hispanics/Latinx (Yoon et al., 2012). For instance, it was found that having a strong group ethnic identity and sense of belongingness can protect their psychological wellbeing against the detrimental impact of perceived discrimination and other adverse interpersonal circumstances (Cobb et al., 2019; Shelton et al., 2020). Importantly, the desire to group belongingness and social connectedness with peers and adults in an extrafamilial context such as school or neighborhood is particularly salient during adolescence, as individuals begin to explore who they are and how they fit in the social world (Brown & Larson, 2009). It should be noted that this group of youth belong to a community that offers longstanding nonprofit services to recently immigrated families, which continued to operate during COVID-19. Thus, such testimonies corroborate the importance of promoting support within the community to buffer the negative consequences of the pandemic and avoid heightened stigmatization in the long term.

Theme three (information overload) reflected that the majority of participants felt overwhelmed by media content about the pandemic. These findings illustrate the constant exposure youth have to pandemic-related news and emphasizes the need to have direct conversations with them about these issues at home and school to alleviate their anxiety and avoid panic (Dalton et al., 2020; Imran et al., 2020). It also emphasizes the importance of responsible reporting of science in the media, specifically related to its impact on child mental health (Sonuga-Barke, 2021).

Theme four (learning from home) illustrated that most of the youths felt that virtual learning was having a negative impact on their schooling for a variety of reasons. As found in previous studies, one of the reasons for negative experiences with online learning could be the lack of appropriate devices and internet among low-income families (Fegert et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). However, in the present study, all participants were provided laptops and mobile hotspots from the school for online learning. Our results point to the need for similar innovations in online resources for a better learning experience in youth, including not only academic content, but also the ability to maintain a more structured schedule and incentivize homework completion in the virtual learning format. These

results also demonstrate the importance of ensuring a direct connection between teachers and young students maintained during confinement (Wang et al., 2020).

Regarding theme five (valuing family), youth expressed strong family connection and bonding during this early phase of the pandemic. These findings may point to *familism*, a Latino cultural construct that prioritizes family over self (Campos et al., 2014; Hernández & Bámaca-Colbert, 2016). In general, youth were grateful for having time with their families. They felt safe at home and enjoyed having someone to talk with. In this regard, it is important to highlight the role that Hispanic/Latinx families have on instilling familism values both in the family context and extrafamilial contexts such as the neighborhoods, especially in early adolescence. Concretely, our findings indicate that parental ethnic socialization during this developmental stage promotes the internalization of familism among their offspring which is reflected by the youths' experiences of high cohesion, good parent-child communication, and feelings of connectedness within the family members (Stein et al., 2014). Hispanic/Latinx parents tend to adopt particular parenting practices such as structuring their youths' lives time around nuclear and extended family members, and promoting positive relationships and frequent interactions with family members (Campos et al., 2014). Importantly, such positive parenting practices have been linked to better psychological health in Hispanic/Latinx youth (Zayas et al., 2009). As such, our results show that home confinement offered a good opportunity to enhance the interaction between parents and their adolescent children and strengthen their bonds, and this may have been due to the protective effect of familism in Hispanic/Latinx culture (Penner et al., 2021).

Theme six (impact on psychosocial functioning) reflected mixed emotions among youth: feeling happy to be at home and have more time for play or leisure activities, and also feeling lonely, sad, bored, and disconnected from others. In this regard, it is known that playful activities are linked to positive emotions as they are seen as opportunities for shared experiences and to enjoy spending time with their family (Mondragon et al., 2020). On the other hand, reports of loneliness, sadness, and boredom were expected as at this developmental stage there is a strong need for socialization (e.g., Lewis & Rudolph, 2014). Changes in sleeping and eating habits reported in this group also align with previous findings in youth during the lockdown in Italy, Spain, and China (e.g., Mondragon et al., 2020; Jiao et al., 2020; Orgiles, 2020). It seems that not being able to socialize as much as before has impacted the youth's mood, and the lack of a structured routine also affected their eating and sleeping habits. These findings are relevant in terms of pointing to the importance of a structured schedule for youth. In this regard, it would be positive to include sessions to connect with peers face-to-face online, as well as health promotion sessions or materials, into virtual school programming. The inclusion of a social hour into their schedule may help provide students with more socialization and peer support. It may also be beneficial to provide youth and families with online programs that motivate them to have a healthy lifestyle at home by increasing physical activities, having a balanced diet, and keeping regular sleep patterns (Brazendale et al., 2017).

Finally, theme seven (coping with COVID-19) reflected youth's use of different coping strategies during the pandemic, the strongest among which was getting support from their parents (Dalton et al., 2020). Video chatting and social media were also discussed, particularly among older youth, and provided needed social support, as also demonstrated in previous studies among people during confinement (Ammar et al., 2020; Imran et al., 2020). Given that video games and TV were also mentioned as coping strategies, future

studies should measure screen time spent by children and adolescents during the pandemic, as there is evidence that increased screen activities might be associated with worsening of interpersonal relationships (Kowert et al., 2014), or poorer social competence (Griffiths, 2010; Lemmens et al., 2011), that may impact youth development.

The themes discussed above should be interpreted against the background of developmental contexts that may differentially have affected younger vs. older adolescents. For instance, early adolescence involves multiple significant developmental changes that occur progressively and that correlate with the age and timing of pubertal maturation (Blakemore et al., 2010; Steinberg, 2005). These developmental changes may affect the ways in which individuals understand and respond to significant life stressors (Steinberg, 2005). In the present study, the reported experiences regarding the pandemic may therefore have differed according to age. For instance, at the age of 10 years, youths may still lack the ability to engage in abstract reasoning or thinking hypothetically (Feldman, 2011). A clear example of this difference is regarding the question of race. Specifically, 5th graders seemed not to be aware of the implications of racism in society when talking about the pandemic. However, as youth mature over the course of adolescence [i.e., acquire more cognitive, social, and emotional capacities (Daddis, 2011; Feldman, 2011)], they may be relatively more equipped to understand and express their own ideas with respect to the impact that the pandemic.

## Strengths and Limitations

This is the first study gathering such information directly from youths from minority groups in the U.S. A key strength of this study was that it demonstrated that the qualitative approach of conducting focus groups exploring youths' experiences during the pandemic lockdown was a successful and valuable method of accessing the social world of this specific group of majority Hispanic/Latinx youth. Such methodology provided us with their underlying values and the context of their comments. Moreover, using this research approach, we were able to elicit experience, understanding, and meaning from the youths', rather than from the researchers' point of view. This is in contrast to the existing empirical work about the impact of the pandemic including children and adolescents, which has largely been dominated by quantitative methodologies using self-report questionnaires or information coming from their parents that may not necessarily be congruent with the perceptions of the youth. Our research provides novel evidence that informs the development of prevention and intervention strategies for related catastrophic life disruptions among youth from minorities groups, such as Hispanics/Latinx, that are at higher risk for marginalization and exclusion (e.g., Wallander et al., 2019). For instance, promoting social and emotional skills through specific programs at school, such as SEL, along with reinforcing presumably protective cultural values such as familism and sense of belongingness to the community would potentially help in buffering the effect of abrupt disruptions of normal routines among Hispanic/Latinx youth in early adolescence. However, future research evaluating the implementation of such programs during mandatory home-schooling is needed.

Despite the above strengths, our findings should be considered within the context of several limitations. First, this study included a small sample collected from one school in an area known for providing strong community support, which limits the generalizability of our findings. Perhaps this context should serve as a model for building more resilient

community responses to help us be more effective in further waves of this virus, its mutations, or other global threats. A second limitation relates to the fact that information relied exclusively on the direct accounts and reports of the youth who participated in the focus groups. Another limitation pertains to the lack of overall variability in the responses of the participants. In the present study, following the guidelines for conducting focus groups with youth, we grouped adolescents according to age, grade, and racial background. Our groups were therefore rather homogeneous, which can make participants feel safer and more willing to express their opinions when the groups are more familiar to them (Adler et al., 2019). However, a potential disadvantage of this way of grouping participants—especially at this age when peer acceptance and group belonging is of key importance for adolescents (Brown & Larson, 2009)—is the effect that social desirability (i.e., peer/participant conformity and unwillingness to disagree with another participant) may exert on the reported experiences by youth. As such, social pressure may bias the results to some extent (Adler et al., 2019; Daley, 2013). While we aimed to understand the impact of the pandemic through the eyes of marginalized youth, multi-method approaches would further enhance our understanding of the impact of COVID-19. For instance, future studies may consider conducting individual interviews as well in order to prevent social desirability bias and get more confidential, sensitive information that some youths may not share in a group context (Adler et al., 2019). Additionally, although the focus group questions were developed by the research team, the questions were not pilot tested prior to the study. While there is ecological validity in this as the SEL team had their finger on what mattered the most for young people, future investigations may pilot test these questions a priori. Another limitation of this study is that more information with respect to the level of acculturation, immigrant history, or previous mental health, that would potentially impact their perspective about the pandemic, were not gathered, and possibly providing an incomplete picture of the specific characteristics and lived experiences of the participants. Lastly, data was collected during the early stages of the pandemic and it is highly likely that the effects of the pandemic may take on different forms as well as levels of negative impact over time. Further research is needed on youth experiences throughout the later stages of the pandemic.

## Conclusions

Our findings suggest that cultural factors such as collectivism and familism in Latinx communities may offer important buffering during COVID-19 and may serve as a model for future community resilience development. Future research studies evaluating programs such as SEL that followed youth during home-schooling providing a space to talk about their emotions and thoughts related to the impact of the pandemic and training in strategies to cope with distress are needed. Nevertheless, it is evident from the voices of youth in our study that they miss physical contact with friends and family members and attending school in person. There is also an apparent need to establish a new routine schedule in order to have more activities during the day. In this regard, schools and families should design an alternative and structured schedule during home-schooling for early adolescents.

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**Code Availability (Software Application or Custom Code)** Not applicable.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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## Authors and Affiliations

L. Cortés-García<sup>1</sup> · J. Hernández Ortiz<sup>2</sup> · N. Asim<sup>2</sup> · M. Sales<sup>3</sup> · R. Villareal<sup>3</sup> · F. Penner<sup>2</sup> · C. Sharp<sup>2,4</sup>

✉ C. Sharp  
csharp2@central.uh.edu

<sup>1</sup> PROMENTA Research Center, Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Houston, Houston, TX, United States

<sup>3</sup> Connect Community, Houston, TX, United States

<sup>4</sup> University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa