

# Differences in the Fears of Elementary School Children in North and South America: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

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**Abstract** This study compared the fears of North American and South American children in Grades 2–5. Fears were assessed with English and Spanish versions of the American Fear Survey Schedule (FSSC-AM; Burnham 2005). Specific fears and several most common fears differed across the two countries. Overall, the South American children and the girls from both countries had significantly higher fear intensity scores than North American children and the boys. Fear intensity scores also differed significantly across racial backgrounds. Implications for counsellors and directions for future research are considered.

**Keywords** Fear · Children · Adolescents · South American · North American

## Introduction

In consideration of the expansive fear research from the late 1890s (Hall 1897) to the present (Burnham and Hooper 2008a; Gullone 1999, 2000), a limited number of studies have examined children's fears across countries (Burkhardt *et al.* 2003). Nonetheless, cross-national investigations and culturally-relevant fears are important as culture appears preliminarily to influence the presentation, type, and intensity of children's fears (Burkhardt *et al.* 2003; Elebedour *et al.* 1997; Ollendick *et al.* 1996; Shore and Rapport 1998). Looking across fear research, the 1980s marked the beginning of studies that evaluated children's fears cross-nationally. Since cross-cultural comparisons across countries add to global information about similarities and differences in the fears of children and adolescents, they warrant closer examination and attention from professionals in the helping fields. Counsellors who work with youth will benefit from this information since few fear studies have been published in counselling journals.

A review of what has been evidenced in the literature about children's fears in diverse cultures and countries is followed by a discussion of the instruments most widely used to

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assess racially and ethnically diverse children's fears. Given the dearth of literature on fears in racially diverse populations (in particular in Latino children) and culturally diverse communities (e.g., South America), the present study was directed toward filling this gap. The findings are presented with implications for practice and recommendations for future cross-cultural research.

## Examining Fears Across Countries

### Cross-Cultural Studies

From an examination of the established literature on children's fears, most of the cross-cultural fear studies have compared two countries. The comparisons have included: (1) Australia and the U.S. (Burnham and Gullone 1997; Ollendick *et al.* 1989; Ollendick and King 1991), (2) England and the U.S. (Ollendick and Yule 1990), (3) the Netherlands Antilles and Belgium (Muris *et al.* 2002), and (4) Finland and Estonia (Lahikainen *et al.* 2003). Alternatively, one investigation compared four countries, spanning four continents (i.e., U.S., Australia, China, and Africa) (Ollendick *et al.* 1996). In the cross-cultural fear studies available, a number of fear variables have been consistently assessed. They often include *most common fears*, *gender*, *age differences in fear intensity*, and *open-ended responses*. The literature related to each of these areas is examined prior to introducing the present study.

### *Most Common Fears*

Of the cross-cultural fears studies, many have identified the top ranked or "most common fears" (Burnham and Gullone 1997; Elebedour *et al.* 1997; Lahikainen *et al.* 2003; Muris *et al.* 2002; Ollendick and King 1991; Ollendick *et al.* 1989). Overall, the findings have suggested that there are more similarities than differences in the most common fears. For instance, when Australian and American fears were compared (Burnham and Gullone 1997), seven of the top 10 most common fears were the same (i.e., "AIDS," "not being able to breathe," "being kidnapped," "someone in my family dying," "myself dying," "being hit by a car or truck," "being threatened with a gun," and "nuclear war").

Some years prior, Ollendick and King (1991) also found more similarities than differences in the responses between American and Australian samples. In explanation of the commonalities in most common fears between these two countries, Ollendick and King (1991) posited that the Australian and the American samples were similar in "...respect to life style and values" (p. 25), thus their fears overlap.

Certain differences in fears reflect cultural distinctions (Burnham and Gullone 1997). In several studies, societal issues and location appeared to lead to culturally specific fears. For example, American children uniquely endorsed "murderers," whereas their Australian counterparts, living in a country surrounded by water, uniquely endorsed "sharks" (Burnham and Gullone 1997). Also, when Ollendick and King (1991) compared Australian and American children, they reported differences related to medical and school-related concerns (i.e., Australian children had more fears of "getting sick," while American children ranked "getting poor grades" and "being sent to the principal" higher). When the U.S., China, Nigeria, and Australia's most common fears were compared, more prominent differences were found across continents. For example, the most common fears for the Nigerian sample were distinctive (i.e., Nigerian top fears included "snakes" and

“deep water”). Nonetheless, even with such differences, six of 10 fears were the same across the four continents, suggesting certain commonalities across cultures (Ollendick *et al.* 1996).

Given the discussion on the similarities in the most common fears, researchers have also noted that there are “specific and idiosyncratic” fears (Muris *et al.* 2002, p. 467). To illustrate, several studies in the U.S. revealed specific fears in the aftermath of catastrophic events. For example, after 9/11, “terrorist attacks” as a fear significantly increased for American children (Burnham 2005). Similarly, after Hurricane Katrina, “hurricane-related” fears were prevalent among children living in and near New Orleans (Burnham *et al.* 2008). Both examples clearly showed that after tragic events, specific and identifiable fears related to the tragedy were prevalent among youth in the U.S.

In order to ascertain whether or not specific and idiosyncratic fears were prevalent across cross-cultural studies, another examination of the literature was undertaken by the authors. Based on published cross-cultural studies on children’s fears, a trend for specific fears in cross-cultural comparisons was found. Examples included the aforementioned (e.g., “deep water” and “snakes” in Nigeria (Ollendick *et al.* 1996), “murderers” and “school-specific” fears in the U.S., and “sharks” in Australia (Gullone and King 1993)). Similarly, children from the Netherlands Antilles near the Caribbean Sea feared “storms” and “hurricanes” more than the children from Belgium (Muris *et al.* 2002). When four countries were compared, including western and non-western countries, distinctive fears were evident across the countries (Muris *et al.* 2002, p. 467). For example, high ranking fears across the countries included “ghosts” in China, “snakes” in Nigeria, and “guns” in Australia (Ollendick *et al.* 1996).

Based on the review, there were also idiosyncratic fears in several countries that lacked explanation based on location or culture. For example, Muris *et al.* (2002) reported idiosyncratic fears such as “floods” for the children from Belgium and “snakes” for the children in the Netherlands Antilles, while Estonian children were much more fearful of spiders than Finnish children (Lahikainen *et al.* 2003).

Yet, aside from certain country-specific or event-specific fears, it should be noted that most common fears across countries and even continents are similar. Muris *et al.*’s (2002) view, that “...the rank order of most common fears as well as general fear levels are quite comparable among children from different cultures” (p. 467) remains evident today.

### *Gender and Fear Intensity*

Gender differences in fears have been documented through the decades (Angelino *et al.* 1956; Burnham 1995; Burnham and Gullone 1997; Gullone and King 1992, 1993; King *et al.* 1989; Lapouse and Monk 1959; Scherer and Nakamura 1968). When gender and fear intensity comparisons have been considered across countries, more variation exists than what has been typically reported within the U.S.

Following what seems to be a typical pattern, girls were significantly more fearful than boys in comparisons between the U.S. and Australia (Burnham and Gullone 1997; Ollendick *et al.* 1991; Ollendick *et al.* 1989) and between the Netherlands Antilles and Belgium (Muris *et al.* 2002). However, by contrast, when four countries were compared (i.e., Australia, U.S., China, and Nigeria), whilst girls were significantly more fearful in three of the countries, this was not the case in Nigeria (Ollendick *et al.* 1996). Other discrepancies in gender findings were determined by Ollendick *et al.* (1996) and Lahikainen *et al.* (2003)—in both studies, boys and girls were equally fearful. Consequently, it appears that gender differences are less predictable cross-culturally.

### *Age and Fear Intensity*

Age differences have also been well-documented with typical patterns evident (Burnham 1995; Burnham and Hooper 2008b; Davidson *et al.* 1989; Gullone and King 1992, 1993). These past studies have revealed such findings as a pattern of fear decreases with age (e.g., ghosts, supernatural), and certain fear increases with age (e.g., school and social fears). Yet, similar to more gender differences cross-culturally, more variations among ages seem to appear when studies are completed across countries. While Burnham and Gullone (1997), Muris *et al.* (2002), and Ollendick *et al.* (1991) found in general that fears decreased as age increased, other cross-cultural studies have reported different findings. For example, Lahikainen *et al.* (2003), contrary to other studies, did not find any overall age differences in fears in the cross-national study. However, when Ollendick *et al.* (1996) compared the fears of children in four countries, the children from the U.S. and Australia had general fear decreases with age, while China and Nigeria had fear increases with age (i.e., China reported increased fears for 11 to 13 year olds and Nigeria had the highest fears of all).

### *Open-Ended Responses*

Self-generated fear responses are considered as another means for children to express what makes them fearful. Fear studies have used open-ended responses to allow opportunity for children to provide their own input about fears. The question, “What else makes you or people your age scared, afraid or fearful?”, has been used frequently (Burnham 1995, 2005; Gullone and King 1992, 1993). Over time, this has revealed specific fears related to traumatic events. For example, after Hurricane Katrina, Burnham *et al.* (2008) illustrated that self-generated responses from the children were often related to the after-effects of that disaster (e.g., storms, snakes, hurricanes). It should also be noted that individual circumstances and personalities of the children can also influence fear-generated responses.

### **Measuring Fears Across Countries**

Critical to researchers, counsellors and other practitioners’ understandings of the extent to which cultural factors and diverse contexts and countries relate to children’s fears are the measurements that are used to conduct studies. Gullone (2000) noted that since the late 1960s, one instrument has emerged as the measure of choice to report children’s fears (i.e., the Fear Survey Schedule for Children [FSSC; Scherer and Nakamura 1968]). Over time, the FSSC has been updated—(American Fear Survey Schedule [FSSC-AM, Burnham 2005]; Fear Survey Schedule for Children-II [FSSC-II, Gullone and King 1992]; Fear Survey Schedule for Children—Revised [FSSC-R, Ollendick 1983]). It has also been translated into several languages—Chinese (Dong *et al.* 1994), Greek (Mellon *et al.* 2004), Hebrew and Arabic (Elebedour *et al.* 1997), Spanish (Burnham 2004; Sandin 1997; Varela *et al.* 2008), Turkish (Erol *et al.* 1990)—and established itself as an instrument that can be used in diverse cultural locations to measure the fears of children and adolescents between the ages of 7–18 (Gullone 2000; Lahikainen *et al.* 2003; Ollendick *et al.* 1989).

Of significance to the present study, in the context of the body of fear literature spanning from the 19th century to the 21st century, less than 10 studies have examined fear differences across countries using a version of the FSSC. Also, to our knowledge, no cross-cultural studies have examined children’s fears in Latin America, using the FSSC or otherwise. A comparison of the fears of South American children to their North American

counterparts is desirable since the culture, environment, and circumstances between North and South America are quite diverse and little is known about how fears differ across the two countries.

### Examining Fears in Hispanic Children

In relation to the fear literature, limited work on Hispanic youth has been published and the majority of research has been with Hispanic children residing in the U.S. Of the four available fear studies, three compared White and Hispanic youth within the U.S. (Burnham and Lomax 2009; Ginsberg and Silverman 1996; Owen 1998), while one (Varela *et al.* 2008) examined White and Hispanic children in the U.S. with children from Mexico.

Based on the studies that exist, certain fears appear to differ across White and Hispanic populations. For example, Owen (1998) reported a higher fear of “earthquakes” among U.S. Hispanic children and higher fears of “fire and death” among White children. Other U.S. fear studies with Hispanic children have shown notable differences in comparison to White children. The findings for Hispanic children are: (1) higher separation anxiety (Ginsberg and Silverman 1996), (2) more health-related worries (Silverman *et al.* 1995), (3) more fear of such things as getting lost, darkness, and thunderstorms than White children (Burnham and Lomax 2009); and (4) more fears among Hispanic children in the U.S. and Mexico than White children in relation to “general worries, fears of the unknown, and fears of death and danger” (Varela *et al.* 2008, p. 140). These findings, taken together, inform the present study.

### The Present Study

Because this study involved children from South America, and specifically from the Republic of Colombia (República de Colombia), a brief overview of that setting is needed. Colombia is a country with a high poverty rate and levels of violence. Black (2005) reported that 80% of the country lived in poverty, with “46% in extreme poverty” and that “90% of the land was owned by 10% of the population” (p. 406). Approximately 75% of the people in Colombia live in urban environments, yet one-third of the elementary-school aged children have not attended school (Black 2005).

There are two prominent guerilla groups in Colombia, the FARC (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or the People’s Army [*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo*]) and ELN (National Liberation Army [*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*]), who fight the official military in Colombia, and are often funded through cocaine trafficking (Black 2005). Violence and kidnappings have been reported through the years, with children exposed to a dangerous environment that appears to be drastically different from the environments to which North American children are exposed. The U.S. military has influence in Colombia, as a part of Plan Colombia (2000).

Taken together, these various contextual, and cultural factors may have an impact on the fears experienced by South American children. It is clear that there is considerable contrast between the culture, environment, and circumstances in North and South America, and little is known about how fears of young children might differ between them. The present study seems warranted as a way to fill this gap in the literature base, and concurrently offers insights to counsellors and other helping professionals who work with school-aged youth in these and other contexts.

## Aims of the Present Study

The overall aims of this study were (1) to utilize a version of the FSSC-AM (Burnham 2005) to compare the fear intensity and terror-related fear intensity scores of children (Grades 2–5) in South America (Colombia) and North America (U.S.), (2) to examine cultural differences across gender, race, and the most common fears identified, and (3) to seek open-ended fear responses to further analyze likely differences across the two locations.

Based on previous literature, we hypothesized that in investigating the fears of young children in the two locations:

1. The most common fears of children would differ between the two locations.
2. Girls from both locations would have significantly higher fear intensity scores than boys.
3. Fear intensity would differ significantly based on racial backgrounds.
4. Children from South America would have significantly higher terror-related fear intensity than children from North America.
5. Open-ended responses would reflect specific fears based on the location concerned.

## Method

### Participants

There was a total of 584 participants in this study, representing children from South America and North America. Each sample is described separately.

### *South American Sample*

There were 235 children involved from one private and one public school in Bogota, Colombia. This comprised 110 (46.8%) girls, 123 (52.3%) boys, and two (0.9%) who did not report gender. Grades represented were 57 (24.3%) in Grade 2, 61 (26.0%) in Grade 3, 64 (27.2%) in Grade 4, and 53 (22.6%) in Grade 5, representing ages 7–11. The racial backgrounds included 181 (83.4%) Hispanic children, 31 (14.3%) White children, three (1.3%) Black/African American children, two other (0.10%), and 18 did not report racial background.

Within the sample in Bogota were natives of South America and also North American children, whose parents lived in Colombia and worked for the U.S. Embassy or the U.S. Armed Forces in Colombia. South American children in this study went to either a private elementary school or an elementary school with extreme poverty. The two South American school populations were convenience samples in neighboring schools.

### *North American Sample*

There were 349 children involved from four public schools in two southeastern states in the U.S. This comprised 182 (52.1%) girls, 163 (46.7%) boys, and four (1.1%) who did not report gender. Grades represented were 88 (25.2%) in Grade 2, 96 (27.5%) in Grade 3, 81 (23.2%) in Grade 4, and 84 (24.1%) in Grade 5, representing ages 7–11. The racial backgrounds included 80 (22.9%) Hispanic children, 129 (37.0%), White children, 122

(35%) Black/African American children, six other (1.7%), and 12 did not report racial background.

Within this sample of children from North America, the children were from public schools in southeastern states in the U.S. Children came from schools that ranged from high poverty to low poverty, defined by the proportion of children eligible for free/reduced lunch services at school.

### Instrument

To investigate and measure the fears of youth in Grades 2–5, the FSSC-AM (Burnham 2005; English and Spanish versions) was used. The FSSC-AM is an adapted version of the 1992 Australian Fear Survey Schedule for Children-II (FSSC-II; Gullone and King 1992, 1993). It is an ipsative survey with 95 items, such as “snakes,” “bees,” “spiders,” “taking a test,” “nuclear war,” and “having to fight in a war.” The instrument includes an open-ended response, “What else makes you or people your age afraid, scared, or fearful?”

Psychometric properties of the FSSC-AM and FSSC-II indicate that both instruments have sound score validity and good reliability (Burnham 2007; Burnham and Gullone 1997; Gullone and King 1992). Gullone and King (1992) reported good convergent, divergent, and construct validity. In a recent study, Burnham (2007) reported a Cronbach alpha reliability estimate at .97 for the FSSC-AM. The FSSC-AM has demonstrated high internal consistency throughout its development and use with diverse populations (Burnham and Gullone 1997; Gullone and King 1992, 1993; Gullone 2000).

Prior to this study, the FSSC-AM had been translated into Spanish (Burnham 2004) to be used with U.S. children primarily from Central America, Mexico, and Spain. Since the Spanish version of the FSSC-AM was to be used in Bogota for this study, further analysis of the survey was completed. The translated version was examined by a Spanish linguistic expert with extensive knowledge of the language of persons who live in Bogota, Colombia. Several changes were made to the directions on the FSSC-AM and to fear items so as to be appropriate for Latin America. For example the item “Car wreck/car accident” was translated for Colombian children to “un accidente de carro.” School was changed to “colegio” and the demographic section of the FSSC-AM was changed to suit the culture of the Colombian children.

### Procedures

After Institutional Review Board approval, approaches were made in two school districts in Bogota, Colombia and the schools in the U.S. Permission to administer the survey was sought and granted at K-5 schools in Colombia, South America and States in the U.S. Written consent forms and verbal assent were required.

The first author and assistants administered the FSSC-AM in classrooms at schools in South America and North America. Prior to handing out the survey, the directions on the FSSC-AM were read aloud to all children, and for the youngest, in Grades 2 and 3, the entire survey was read aloud. The children were asked to respond to the fear items by marking an “X” in front of their choice. The children had a choice of three Likert-style options which included, “not scared,” “scared,” or “very scared.” At the end of the survey, the open-ended response was also asked, “What else makes you or people your age scared, afraid, or fearful?” This open-ended response was used to offer an option for writing in additional fears. During the administration, the survey administrators walked around the room to answer questions and to ensure that all children were on task. If questions were asked by the children, they were answered immediately.

## Analysis

We used the following data analytic procedures to examine the five hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that the most common fears of children in South America would differ from those of children in North America. To ascertain the most common fears, the highest frequency means for the “scared” and “very scared” responses were calculated. The second hypothesis was that girls from South America and North America would have significantly higher fear intensity scores than boys from South and North America and the third hypothesis was that fears in South America and North America would differ significantly on fear intensity based on racial backgrounds. To determine hypotheses two and three, a 2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (country)  $\times$  3 (race) factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the differences across gender, country, and race.

Hypothesis four was that children from South America would have significantly higher terror-related fear intensity scores (based on the nine terrorist-related fear items on the FSSC-AM) than children from North America. To determine this hypothesis, a 2 $\times$ 2 (i.e., gender [male, female] and country [North America, South America]) MANOVA was conducted in regard to these items.

Hypothesis five was that the open-ended responses would reflect specific fears based on the country of origin. For the open-ended response, an additional procedure was used with this question to ensure that the translations were accurately represented since the children from South America had the option to answer the FSSC-AM in either English or Spanish. One researcher and a graduate assistant examined the data initially and listed the self-generated fears. The items in question were then sent electronically to two experts in South American linguistics. Agreement among the researchers and linguistic experts was needed in order for an item to be included.

## Results

### Most Common Fears

In the examination of the top 20 most common fears, there were more similarities between the fears of North and South American students than differences. Of the endorsements, 16 of the top 20 most common fears were the same across the two countries (see Table 1). The fears that were most common in both countries were: “being kidnapped,” “myself dying,” “someone in my family having an accident,” “being threatened with a gun,” “not being able to breathe,” “taking bad or dangerous drugs,” “murderers,” “a family member dying,” “being hit by a car or truck,” “a burglar breaking into our house,” “nuclear war,” “drive-by shootings,” “going to jail,” “AIDS,” and “terrorists attacks.”

The South American children differed from the North American children by endorsing three idiosyncratic fears: “my parents arguing,” “earthquakes,” and “getting an electric shock.” The North American children differed from the South American children by endorsing five idiosyncratic fears: “tornadoes/hurricanes,” “sharks,” “people carrying weapons,” “falling from high places,” and “fighting in a war.”

The stated hypothesis was accepted because of the eight idiosyncratic fears that were found across the two countries with the open-ended response. Of the three fears of children in South America that differed from the North American fears, “earthquakes” appears to be based on location. Earthquakes are frequently experienced in the region of South America in which the study was undertaken. In this same view, several fears of children in North

**Table 1** Top 20 most common fears

Rank	South America (Colombia)	%	North America (U.S.)	%
1	Being kidnapped (a)	94.9	Myself dying (a)	76.5
2	Someone in my family having an accident (b)	94.9	Being threatened with a gun (a)	71.9
3	Not being able to breathe (a)	94.8	Not being able to breathe (a)	71.3
4	Taking bad or dangerous drugs (a)	94.4	Murderers (a)	70.2
5	A family member dying (a)	93.6	Being kidnapped (a)	69.9
6	Being hit by a car or truck (a)	93.6	Being hit by a car or truck (a)	68.8
7	Being threatened with a gun (a)	93.5	A family member dying (a)	64.8
8	A burglar breaking into our house (a)	92.2	Tornadoes/hurricanes (c)	62.8
9	Nuclear war (a)	91.9	Taking bad or dangerous drugs (a)	60.2
10	Drive-by shootings (a)	91.0	Nuclear war (a)	59.9
11	My parents arguing (b)	90.6	Sharks (c)	58.7
12	Getting an electric shock (b)	90.2	Going to jail (a)	56.7
13	Earthquakes (b)	89.6	A burglar breaking into our house (a)	54.7
14	Going to jail (a)	89.3	AIDS (a)	54.7
15	Terrorists attacks (a)	89.2	People carrying weapons (c)	54.4
16	AIDS (a)	88.9	Terrorist attacks (a)	54.2
17	Murderers (a)	88.9	Falling from high places (c)	53.9
18	Myself dying (a)	88.8	Fighting in a war (c)	53.6
19	Gangs (b)	87.9	Shootings (c)	53.6
20	Our country being invaded by enemies (b)	87.6	Drive-by shootings (a)	53.3

(a) indicates similar items across both countries

(b) indicates unique items for South American children

(c) indicates unique items for North American children

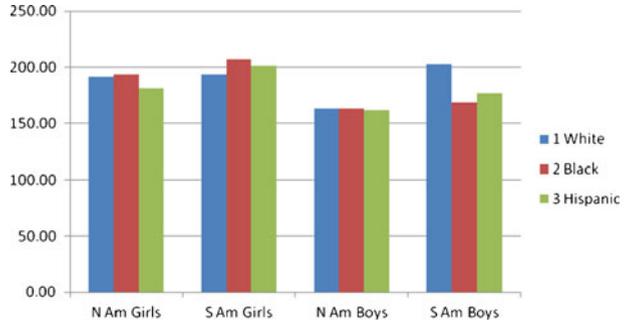
America related to current events (i.e., fighting in a war, tornadoes, hurricanes). Thus, although more of the top fears were in common between the countries than expected, the fear differences were characteristic of current events (war), potential regional disasters (natural disasters of the region [earthquakes in South America vs. tornadoes and hurricanes in the southeastern U.S.]). Thus, the hypothesis was accepted.

### Fear Intensity

The overall fear intensity score for both North and South American children was  $M=182.26$ ,  $SD=34.18$ . A 2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (country)  $\times$  3 (race) factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine fear intensity as a function of gender, country, and race. There was one significant interaction, gender  $\times$  country  $\times$  race  $F(2, 530)=3.80$ ,  $p=.02$ ,  $\eta^2=.01$ . Figure 1 shows a bar graph with details about the interaction, while Table 2 shows fear intensity rank order by groups.

The interaction established that North American White girls ( $M=191.54$ ) were significantly more fearful than North American White boys ( $M=163.09$ ). However, in comparison, the South American White girls ( $M=193.36$ ) were significantly less fearful than South American White boys ( $M=202.81$ ). This was an unexpected finding. In fact, South American White boys had the highest overall means of all White groups in the study. The South American boys and girls also had overall higher fears than the North American White boys and girls.

**Fig. 1** Interaction (Gender × Country × Race). Note: Fear intensity scores are shown across gender, country, and race



The North American Black girls ( $M=193.77$ ) and the South American Black girls ( $M=207.00$ ) had significantly higher means than the North American Black boys ( $M=162.98$ ) and South American Black boys ( $M=169.00$ ). Overall, South American Black girls had the highest means. Of the gender and racial group differences, the North American Black boys were the least fearful.

The North American Hispanic girls ( $M=181.36$ ) had significantly higher fears than the North American Hispanic boys ( $M=161.73$ ), while South American Hispanic girls ( $M=201.18$ ) had significantly higher fears than South American Hispanic boys ( $M=177.27$ ).

**Table 2** Fear and terror intensity scores across gender, county, racial background

Fear intensity rank (highest to lowest)	Country	Racial background	Gender
1	South America	Black	Girls
2	South America	White	Boys
3	South America	Hispanic	Girls
4	North America	Black	Girls
5	South America	White	Girls
6	North America	White	Girls
7	North America	Hispanic	Girls
8	North America	Hispanic	Boys
9	South America	Black	Boys
10	North America	White	Boys
11	North America	Black	Boys
12	North America	Hispanic	
	Fear intensity	Terror intensity	
Overall	182.26 (34.18)	21.19 (4.52)	
North American	176.99 (33.93)	20.75 (4.71)	
South American	190.11 (33.10)	21.85 (4.17)	
White	182.94 (31.01)	21.72 (4.17)	
Black	178.62 (32.83)	21.28 (4.50)	
Hispanic	183.23 (37.12)	20.75 (4.83)	
Girls	194.08 (28.34)	22.73 (3.51)	
Boys	170.71 (35.52)	19.69 (4.88)	
Ages 7–10	180.88 (33.97)	21.11 (4.59)	
Ages 11–12	181.02 (34.75)	21.04 (4.61)	

Overall, the highest means for Hispanic children were South American girls, followed by North American girls. Of the gender group differences, the North American Hispanic boys were the least fearful.

Table 2 (bottom half) shows fear intensity scores classified by gender, country, and race. There were two significant main effects; gender  $F(1, 530)=4.87, p=.03, \eta^2=.01$  and country  $F(1, 530)=4.02, p=.04, \eta^2=.01$ . Girls overall reported significantly higher fears ( $M=194.01, SD=28.86$ ) than the boys ( $M=170.06, SD=35.64$ ), while South American children overall ( $M=190.54, SD=33.70$ ) had significantly higher fears than North American children overall ( $M=176.89, SD=33.99$ ).

The rank order of the 12 groups, based on fear intensity levels, is important to consider. They are, highest to lowest respectively: (1) South American Black girls, (2) South American White boys, (3) South American Hispanic girls, (4) North American Black girls, (5) South American White girls, (6) North American White girls, (7) North American Hispanic girls, (8) South American Hispanic boys, (9) South American Black boys, (10) North American White boys, (11) North American Black boys, and (12) North American Hispanic boys. The fear intensity rankings are shown in Table 2.

The two stated hypotheses were accepted. Overall, girls had significantly higher fear intensity scores than boys from both countries. There were also significant racial differences across South America and North America, as previously outlined.

#### Terror-Related Fear Items

The overall terror-related fear intensity score for South American and North American children was  $M=21.19, SD=4.52$ . A  $2 \times 2$  (i.e., gender [male, female] and country [North America, South America]) MANOVA was conducted to examine the terror-related fear intensity scores, based on the nine terrorist-related fear items on the FSSC-AM. The nine terror-related fear items on the FSSC-AM were the dependent variables, while gender and country were the independent variables. There were no interactions.

There were two significant main effects: gender (Wilk's  $\Lambda=.86, F[9, 515]=9.41, p=.00, \eta^2=.14$ ) and country (Wilk's  $\Lambda=.93, F[9, 515]=4.32, p=.00, \eta^2=.07$ ). The univariate ANOVAs for gender were significant for all nine terror-related fear items: "having to fight in a war"  $F(1, 515)=37.62, p=.00, \eta^2=.07$ , "our country being invaded by enemies"  $F(1, 515)=30.65, p=.00, \eta^2=.06$ , "nuclear war"  $F(1, 515)=12.57, p=.00, \eta^2=.02$ , "murderers"  $F(1, 515)=30.42, p=.00, \eta^2=.06$ , "being threatened with a gun"  $F(1, 515)=36.98, p=.00, \eta^2=.07$ , "terrorist attacks"  $F(1, 515)=30.29, p=.00, \eta^2=.06$ , "drive-by shootings"  $F(1, 515)=55.21, p=.00, \eta^2=.10$ , "people carrying guns, knives, or weapons"  $F(1, 515)=57.33, p=.00, \eta^2=.10$ , and "flying in a plane"  $F(1, 515)=10.01, p=.00, \eta^2=.10$ . Girls overall were more fearful than boys for all nine terror-related fear items.

The univariate ANOVA for country was significant for five of the fear items: "our country being invaded by enemies"  $F(1, 515)=4.70, p=.03, \eta^2=.01$ , "nuclear war"  $F(1, 515)=10.09, p=.00, \eta^2=.02$ , "terrorist attacks"  $F(1, 515)=8.38, p=.00, \eta^2=.02$ , "drive-by shootings"  $F(1, 515)=17.42, p=.00, \eta^2=.03$ , and "people carrying guns, knives, or weapons"  $F(1, 515)=7.95, p=.01, \eta^2=.02$ . For these five terror-related fear items, the South American children were significantly more fearful than the North American children. The means and standard deviations for gender and country are given in Table 3. The stated hypothesis related to terror-related fear scores, that South American children would have significantly higher intensity levels, was accepted.

The open-ended response generated distinctive fears for both the North American and South American children (See Table 4), with items relating to the culture of both countries emerging.

**Table 3** Terror score means

Fear item	Girls	Boys	North Am	South Am
Having to fight in a war	2.61 (.63)	2.21(.84)	NS	NS
Our country being invaded by enemy	2.56 (.63)	2.19 (.80)	2.33 (.75)	2.44 (.72)
Nuclear war	2.67 (.57)	2.45 (.77)	2.49 (.72)	2.67 (.63)
Murderers	2.77 (.55)	2.43 (.77)	NS	NS
Threatened with a gun	2.82 (.45)	2.49 (.73)	NS	NS
Terrorist attacks	2.64 (.60)	2.29 (.79)	2.40 (.73)	2.56 (.70)
Drive-by shootings	2.70 (.55)	2.24 (.80)	2.38 (.75)	2.61 (.66)
People carrying guns, knives, and weapons	2.66 (.60)	2.18 (.80)	2.36 (.77)	2.51 (.69)
Flying in a plane	1.62 (.79)	1.38 (.67)	NS	NS

For example, in Colombia, the FARC was mentioned, as well as such fears as “bullets,” “grenades,” “destruction,” and “Hugo Chávez” (the President of Venezuela). In North America, the children identified such fears as “explosives,” “bombs,” and “world wars.” While the South American fears were more specific, the North American fears were more general in nature. Hypothesis five relating to fears being expressed specific to location was accepted.

## Discussion

### Most Common Fears

The similarities and differences in the top ranked “most common fears” between the South American children and the North American children was an important aspect of this study. In most fear studies, the top 10 most common fears are considered, but to offer further clarity and information about the fears of elementary-aged children here, the top 20 ranked items were considered in this particular study.

**Table 4** Open-ended question “what else makes you or people your age scared or afraid?”

#### South American Children

Gang Fights (*peleas entre pandillas*)

FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*)

Bullets(*balas*)

Alcoholics (*alcohólicos*)

Destruction (*destrucción*)

Hugo Chávez - President of Venezuela (*Presidente de Venezuela*)

Grenades (*granadas*)

Potbellied person (*panzón*)

#### North American Children

Explosives

World wars

Bombs

Clowns

Devil

Similar to previous research, more similarities than differences in top ranked fears were found (Burnham and Gullone 1997; Burnham and Hooper 2008b; Elebedour *et al.* 1997; Lahikainen *et al.* 2003; Muris *et al.* 2002; Ollendick and King 1991; Ollendick *et al.* 1989, 1996). Typical top ranked fears, similar to other studies, related to such experiences as “not being able to breathe,” “myself dying,” “someone in my family having an accident,” and “AIDS.” Yet, both countries had elevated fears of “terrorists attacks” and listed this fear among the top 20, which was a distinctive finding when the two countries were compared.

Because the differences across the countries were event-specific for the regions of the country, the hypothesis was accepted, as explained subsequently. Several “specific and idiosyncratic” fears (Muris *et al.* 2002, p. 467) across the North and South American samples were geographically-related such as “earthquakes” in South America and “tornadoes and hurricanes” in North America. Earthquakes were likely based on the geological environment of South America and its tendency to experience earthquakes, similar to the endorsement of “tornadoes and earthquakes” with children in the southeastern U.S, where both disasters have been experienced recently. This trend seems similar to past studies when most common fears conveyed fears of the current time period, crises, or environmental circumstances (e.g., “terrorist attacks” for U.S. children after 9/11 (Burnham 2005), “hurricanes” for children in New Orleans (Burnham *et al.* 2008) after Hurricane Katrina, “sharks” for Australian children (Gullone and King 1992), and “snakes” for Nigerian children (Ollendick *et al.* 1996)).

The North American children endorsed two additional most common fears that related to recent events in the U.S. One could assume that with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that the endorsement of “fighting in a war” as a top fear makes sense. Additionally, “shootings” and “people carrying weapons” could relate to crime in communities and recent school shootings in schools and universities. There were also some unpredictable results. For example, that the fear “fighting in a war” was not a top 20 fear in Colombia, despite a history of warfare in the country.

### Fear Intensity

To our knowledge no fear research using the FSSC has been completed with Hispanic children until this study. However, based on previous literature that has shown differences in fears between Hispanic children and White children, we expected some fear variations (Burnham and Lomax 2009; Ginsberg and Silverman 1996; Owen 1998; Silverman *et al.* 1995; Varela *et al.* 2008). When the data were further analyzed, clear differences were found.

Fear intensity scores were higher for girls than boys in both countries. This was expected, since similar gender differences in fears have been documented through the decades (Angelino *et al.* 1956; Burnham 1995; Burnham and Gullone 1997; Gullone and King 1992, 1993; King *et al.* 1989; Lapouse and Monk 1959; Scherer and Nakamura 1968). To add, higher fears for girls have been found to be the case across cross-cultural fear studies (Burnham and Gullone 1997; Muris *et al.* 2002; Ollendick *et al.* 1991; Ollendick *et al.* 1989), although Ollendick *et al.* (1996) and Lahikainen *et al.* (2003) reported boys and girls were equally fearful. Overall, based on findings from this study, similar to more gender differences across countries, we note a tendency for more variations among age groups appearing when studies are completed across countries.

Overall, the South American fear intensity levels were higher than North American fear levels in this study. The gender and racial background comparisons offered plausible

differences. Taken together, these findings offer new information for helping professionals in both countries as they consider the most fearful children and who to target for interventions. These will be considered separately.

Looking specifically at the girls in this study, the South American girls had significantly higher fears than the North American girls. Of the South American girls, Black girls had the highest fears, followed by Hispanic girls, and then White girls. For North American girls, Black girls had the highest fears, followed by White girls, and then Hispanic girls.

Looking specifically at boys in this study, the South American White boys had the highest fears, followed by Hispanic boys, and then Black boys. The fear level of the White boys from South America was one of the most compelling results, since most studies show that typically boys are less fearful than girls. Nonetheless, the South American White boys were much more fearful (e.g., boys' fear levels were more similar to South American girls than North American boys). The South American White boys were the second most fearful group in the study.

On the other hand, the South American Hispanic boys and South American Black boys were significantly less fearful, with their fear levels more consistent with prior studies (Angelino *et al.* 1956; Burnham 1995; Burnham and Gullone 1997; Gullone and King 1992, 1993; King *et al.* 1989; Lapouse and Monk 1959; Scherer and Nakamura 1968) and more similar to their North American male peers in this study. As expected, the North American boys reported the least amount of overall fears, similar to what has been found previously in the literature across the decades (Angelino *et al.* 1956; Burnham 1995; Burnham and Gullone 1997; Gullone and King 1992, 1993; King *et al.* 1989; Lapouse and Monk 1959; Scherer and Nakamura 1968).

The South American girls (i.e., White, Black, and Hispanic) were the most fearful group overall in the study. This informs counselors and other helping professionals that the most fearful group (in this case, South American Black girls) would likely benefit from individual and group counselling at school and in the communities. As previously mentioned, the South American White boys' endorsement of more fears than girls in North America was a unique finding. The reporting of more fears by boys than girls opposes decades of findings in regard to gender (Angelino *et al.* 1956; Burnham 1995; Burnham and Gullone 1997; Gullone and King 1992, 1993; King *et al.* 1989; Lapouse and Monk 1959; Scherer and Nakamura 1968). This finding suggests that White males in South America, similar to Black females in South America, may need targeted interventions at school and resources in the community, more than other groups in this study.

For the terror-related fear intensity scores, girls in both countries were higher than boys. This finding was assumed prior to the study. This trend follows previous studies where girls were more fearful than boys (Burnham and Hooper 2008a). It was noteworthy, however, that the girls had significantly higher fears than boys on all nine of the terror items (i.e., "having to fight in a war" "our country being invaded by enemies," "nuclear war," "murderers," "being threatened with a gun," "terrorist attacks," "drive-by shootings," "people carrying guns, knives, or weapons," and "flying in a plane").

For the terror-related fear intensity scores, finding elevated terror scores across North and South America was anticipated. The five terror items in which the South American children were significantly more fearful than their North American counterparts, with the exception of "nuclear war", related specifically to violence they are most likely to be exposed to: (i.e., "our country being invaded by enemies," "terrorist attacks," "drive-by shootings," and "people carrying guns, knives, or weapons"). It appears that the marked differences in the culture and environment of the South American children, in comparison to the North American children, are clear in these findings.

## Open-Ended Responses

The additional fears that resulted from the open-ended response need further review. There were distinctive fear differences when the locations were compared (See Table 4). It appears that “specific and idiosyncratic” fears prevailed (Muris *et al.* 2002, p. 467). The South American children identified various war and terror-related fears, such as FARC, “bullets,” “grenades,” “destruction,” as could be expected with the fighting that has existed in Colombia. The South American children also listed fears related to a political figure from a neighboring country, “Hugo Chávez,” the President of Venezuela. In addition, the South American fears were more specific, while North American fears remained more general fears, such as “explosives,” “bombs,” and “world wars.”

There were limitations to this study. First, the study did not separate out the South American children who were citizens of the country from the children whose parents were in the U.S. military stationed in Bogota, although a small number of students in South America were U.S. citizens. Second, we were limited to two schools that were not homogeneous in Bogota. The authors note that the diversity in the two South American schools could have implications for the study. Third, the FSSC, the instrument used in the study, required checking fears as “not scared,” “scared,” or “very scared” and had only one option for self-generated fears. Fourth, as with any instrument that is translated, issues about language diversity in South America could exist. Thus, generalizability to other settings and schools is limited.

## Implications for Counsellors and Other Helping Professionals

This study offers new insight into cross-cultural and cross-nation fears of young children from Grades 2–5. With over a century of fear research in the U.S. and abroad, less than 10 studies have compared fears across countries using the FSSC. To add, to our knowledge, this was the first study that compared the fears of North American and South American children. Overall, this study pinpoints both general and specific fears that apply to elementary school populations in North and South America. Counsellors who work with youth can benefit from this information since few fear studies have been published.

There were several results from this study that merit a final overview. Although most U.S. studies have overwhelmingly found that girls are more fearful than boys, this was not the case in this study. This study found discrepancies in gender findings similar to Ollendick *et al.* (1996) and Lahikainen *et al.* (2003), lending to the idea that differences in gender could be more prominent in cross-cultural studies. This study noted significant differences across gender, country, and racial background, underlining the need to consider these distinctions in future research related to the fears of young children. To add, racial background comparisons in fears, across and within countries, are important to take into account in the future.

Why were the White boys’ fear levels in South America so elevated? It is speculated that some of the White children in South America were U.S. Embassy or military children, and this could explain part of this conclusion, although not entirely (i.e., while only 14% of the sample from South America were White, these children from the South American sample were among the most fearful).

From this finding, counsellors should think about how children residing outside of their country of origin express realistic fears in relation to the location in which they now reside. In similar situations with military or embassy children living outside their home country,

measures such as a new student orientation during the transition and individual counselling and small group opportunities to discuss feelings related to the move, the new culture, and the school environment could help to ease stress and fears. This study also brought light to the importance for counsellors working with children living in foreign countries to consider childrens' anxieties, fears, and coping skills as the children transition with their families to distant countries (i.e., especially in countries with more violence/warfare than the home country). Such children may need ample opportunities to discuss their feelings with counsellors at school or with other helping professionals outside the school. Intervention and prevention efforts on the part of counsellors to offset potential anxieties and fears are indicated.

With a fear instrument that spans from the 1960s to the present, this was the first study to use the FSSC with South American children. The study revealed contextual and cultural factors that likely had an impact on the fears experienced by South American children. The differences across gender, racial background, and country offer new insights, but need further validation. With the continual threats of war, terrorism, kidnappings, and the narcotic trade, more studies are needed to understand the impact of these phenomena on South American children. Future studies should broaden to children in other regions of South America.

At this time, sparse research has been completed on the fears of Hispanic children in the U.S. and abroad. Little is known about how fears of young children might differ across North and South America and across racial backgrounds. More research is warranted. To add, since only Grades 2–5 were included in this study, additional studies should expand to middle school and high school. Since cross-cultural comparisons add to global information about similarities and differences in the fears of children and adolescents across countries, they warrant closer examination and attention for professionals in the helping fields.

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