



## A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach to Understanding Stress-Coping as an Existential Phenomenon Lived by Healthy Adolescents

by Renée Guimond-Plourde

### Abstract

*Based mainly on research conducted as part of a doctoral thesis (Guimond-Plourde, 2004), this paper introduces an epistemological and methodological framework based on the foundations and characteristics of a qualitative/interpretative approach rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology as conducive to disclosing the meaning that healthy adolescents, aged 15 to 17, attribute to the stress they experience in school and to their coping behaviour. Moving from the empirical to the phenomenal makes it possible to evoke a return to dimensions of meaning which have been set aside or forgotten in the lived experience of stress-coping. By thus bringing stress-coping into focus in a new way, it enables us to glimpse the phenomenon anew, with the prospect of revealing what we haven't yet appreciated. A dual philosophical approach is outlined: a phenomenological perspective apprehends stress-coping as an existential phenomenon, while the hermeneutic focus is on interpreting the links between lived experience and meaning. The kind of knowledge generated by means of this approach offers a new way of understanding that focuses on the unique and personal nature of healthy adolescents' daily life at school and, as such, provides educators with a sensitive account of adolescents' experiences of stress in the school context.*

### How Adolescents Cope with Stress: What We Know

*To understand the rose,  
one person may use geometry  
and another the butterfly*

The above quotation from the French poet Paul Claudel (1929) indicates the current state of scholarly questioning surrounding the general information we have about how adolescents cope with stress. Our understanding comes primarily from the point of view of "geometry", the mathematics of properties and measurement. In the first decade of the 21st century, the scientific, social and popular debate about stress and how we cope with it is clearly in a prolific phase. Ongoing concerns about the health and well-being of populations throughout the world has led to sustained

research on identifying the sources of stress and lack of well-being, as well as strategies to cope with them.

A review of an extensive and prolific field of research reveals different definitions of stress currently in use. The concept of stress is evolving and has been defined in a number of ways by members of various disciplines. In essence, stress implies a transaction between people and their environment, while coping involves people's responses and reactions in ways conducive to overcoming, reducing or simply tolerating all situations that put them off balance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Launier, 1978). Stress-coping, two concepts linked by an hyphen, points to a unitary phenomenon: there is no coping without stress and no stress unrelated to coping. From this stance, stress and coping are inseparably

conjoined and will thus be addressed as stress-coping.

Stress among children and adolescents is recognized as a social and health issue by parents, educators and health officials, as well as by researchers, government agencies and governments (Bradette, Marcotte, Fortin, Royer, & Potvin, 1999; Dumont, 2000; Hobfoll, Schwarzer, & Chon, 1998; Institut de la Statistique du Québec, 2002; Lavoie, 1994; Organisation Mondiale de la Santé, 1998; Ryan-Wenger, Sharrer, & Wynd, 2000; Witkin, 1999). Not only has stress, in the third millennium, been proclaimed a modern worldwide problem and a fact of life for everyone no matter their age, but, more specifically, it is pointed to as a health problem of everyday life that affects young people from 15 to 19 years old (Comité Consultatif Fédéral-Provincial-Territorial sur la Santé de la Population, 1999). Of particular significance is the stress born of rapid, bewildering social change and constantly rising expectations projected by parents, the schools and the media (Elkind, 1981/2006). Worldwide, there is growing evidence that stress can have a significant effect on an adolescent's long-term physical and mental well-being (Byrne & Mazanov, 2002; Chandra & Batada, 2006). Accordingly, the US Department of Health and Human Services Centres for Disease Control and Prevention points out that prolonged or unmanaged stress is associated with health problems later in life, including alcoholism, depression, eating disorders, heart disease, cancer and other chronic diseases (Middlebrooks & Audage, 2008). Studies reveal that, for many researchers, professionals and educators, there are abundant indications that disturbing effects related to mental and physical health as well as academic performance result from, or are at least exacerbated by, a level of stress that goes beyond young people's individual ability to adjust (Casey, 2002; De Noon, 2002; Dombrowski, 1999; Guimond-Plourde, 1994; Plancherel, 1998; Sharrer & Ryan-Wenger, 1991; Skinner & Wellborn, 1997; Viau, 1995).

Over the past 25 years, there has been a growing body of scholarly literature and emerging empirical evidence on stress and how adolescents cope with it, with a wide range of theoretical and praxeological viewpoints (Bolognini, Plancherel, Nunez, & Bettschart, 1994; Compas, 1987; Dumont & Plancherel, 2001; Garnezy & Rutter, 1983; Goodyer, 1994; Rosnet, 2002; Seiffge-Krenke, 1994; Stark, Spirito, Williams, & Guèvremont, 1989; Verstraeten, Gossiaux, & Renard, 2002; Wolchik & Sandler, 1997). Evident from these studies are both apparent trends and limitations. For one thing, studies focusing on stress and coping in young people are relatively few in comparison with those dealing with adults (Bradette et al., 1999; Dumont & Plancherel, 2001;

Plancherel, 1998). Lacking appropriate empirical data, researchers apply a theoretical model based on adult studies to explain how children and adolescents function (Plancherel, 2001). "There are no specific models or theories to explain the entire process of children's stress and coping" (Ryan-Wenger et al., 2000, p. 265). Furthermore, continuing the adult/youth transposition, measurement scales previously designed for adults are adapted for adolescent age groups and their views sought via a table of codified and standardized questions. Lazarus (1998), referring to one kind of rudimentary data, comments that "Questionnaires, including my own, permit quantification, which is an asset, but are apt to produce superficial data because they overlook meaning" (p. 398). An important researcher in the field, Lazarus challenges the separation between the human being and his mode of existential encounter, arguing that the use of standardized instruments to describe a reality from the outside, using already-established categories, cannot reveal dimensions that have not, in some way, been identified in advance.

Secondly, despite the recognition of stress and coping as a social and health problem among adolescents, there is little information available about the point of view of adolescents themselves on their experience of stress and the strategies they develop to manage it (Gushue, 2001; Romer, 1993; Witkin, 1999). The researchers' interest is also generally focused on young people who are experiencing difficulties, with the result that they do not pay attention to the positive benefits of stress. Healthy young people who say that they are dealing well with their stress are particularly absent from this discourse. In addition, both the literature dealing with stress and educational approaches to intervention in stress management testify to what may be termed an 'andragocentric' discourse – that is, one focused on the values and interests of adults and experts. For these and other reasons, adolescents' experiences have remained undocumented as such, because researchers have opted for the discourse of their own peer group and have therefore translated young people's experience into adult terms. The current scientific documentation of adolescents' point of view thus remains limited (Ma & Zhang, 2002).

This adult-and expert-centred (andragocentric) vision has contributed significantly to the growth of research since the 1980s into the way young people experience and cope with stress. Yet this subordination to the adult viewpoint and the lack of research dealing with healthy young people's points of view have left unexplored various facets of the overall issue of stress-coping: How do young people deal with their lived experience of stress-coping? How do they

describe the experience? What meaning do they give to the reality they live through every day? A research framework constructed around such questions would give priority to young people's discourse and the meanings that emerge. Such questions would also make it possible to go beyond the currently dominant ways of thinking, which make an abstraction of the contingent situation of healthy adolescents and which treat existence from the outside, like a problem whose givens can be objectively operationalised and evaluated. By listening to young people talk about their experience, we can begin to understand their actions and plans, what moves them, organizes them and supports them, rather than what defines them from the outside. Acknowledging adolescents as the experts who can inform us about the complexities embedded in their own experience of the existential phenomenon which is stress-coping, is, above all, to acknowledge their centrality to their own reality.

From the perspective of situating subjectivity at the heart of the production of knowledge, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach offers a complementary angle from the "butterfly" point of view – that of a moving reality, the fruit of a construction that is both subjective and intersubjective. Figuratively, this proposes that we bring the phenomenon of stress-coping into ever-moving focus so as to reveal new dimensions of experiencing and coping with stress, thus creating a certain renewal in this research area. With this redirection of our attention, we can ask ourselves how young people situate themselves in relation to this phenomenon, and about the meaning they give to it within the framework of their daily school experiences. Adolescents perceive the world in a unique way and their perceptions make up the phenomenal field. Understanding lived experience from the point of view of those most centrally involved, and allowing their way of speaking and reacting to shape the understanding that evolves, may shed light on the hitherto unexplored existential aspects of a misunderstood phenomenon. Such a stance has major implications in terms of methods methodology.

### Methodological Considerations: An Overview

In their presentation of research as a human activity, Savoie-Zajc & Karsenti (2000) specify the existence of various elements that guide the researcher's decisions: epistemology, theory, methodology and methods. These four elements, interrelated and inseparable, must form a coherent whole in order to make methodological decisions that follow from the epistemological and theoretical positions. This way of defining the issue of stress-coping in adolescence guides the selection of subjects/ collaborators, as well

as suggesting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

A set of criteria drawn from this frame of reference and based on a review of the literature focuses on people who share certain characteristics. The young people who were invited to take part in this study form a purposive sample, a "conscious and voluntary choice of respondents by the researcher" (Savoie-Zajc, 2000, p. 180; my translation), because their competence is perceived as relevant to the issue. The selected subjects/collaborators, both male and female, were healthy young people attending a public secondary school in New Brunswick, Canada. The three girls (Claudia, Sarah and Kamille) and three boys (Antoine, Mario and Sébastien), aged 15 to 17, were registered in the enriched school programme.

In order to obtain reliable material relevant to the objective of the study – that is, understanding the subjective universe of the focal phenomenon – Van der Maren (1995, p. 113) stipulates that the subjects must have had the experience themselves and that they must be able to remember it and create a narrative. Given the requirements of collaboration (participating in interview sessions throughout the year, writing some of their narratives in a journal and collaborating on the analysis of their narrative), availability and interest are fundamental to participating in this kind of study, which demands a sustained personal commitment. Specifically, all the participants in the present study needed to value managing their stress effectively and to commit themselves to reflecting on lived experiences in relation to their memories of the past, and their actions in and emotions about the present and future, via the spoken and written word. The six young people who agreed to participate in May of 2002 continued their collaboration until the end of the study in May 2004.

By opting for this particular purposive sample, an additional dimension is opened up in the area of educational research – that of recognizing young people, and, in particular, to use Bradette's phrase, "those who are doing well at school" (Bradette et al., 1999, p. 73; my translation), for their successes, their personal accomplishments and the value of what they have to say. Such an approach requires an openness that goes beyond the disease model of fixing broken things and interventions based on dysfunction. Overall, this additional dimension enriches a perspective that is currently not much explored in educational research, considering young people as subjects of a story rather than objects of the researcher's questions.

### *A Methodological Process with Dual Philosophical Roots*

Max van Manen, the author of influential works on the development and diffusion of methodological criteria in hermeneutic phenomenological research in education (1984, 1990/1997, 2002), defines the methodological process as an interaction among four activities (Van Manen, 1984). Firstly, the researcher is encouraged to turn to a human phenomenon that interests and engages him in everyday life. Secondly, he is to examine an experience as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualized, which implies that acquired knowledge is not used as the point of departure for exploring the phenomenon in question: the lived experience of the phenomenon has precedence over theoretical knowledge. Thirdly, the themes that characterize the phenomenon under investigation – that is, its essence – must be identified and an attempt must be made to answer the question “What is it that constitutes the nature of this lived experience?” (Van Manen, 1990/1997, p. 32). This reflective part of the process asks about meaning; it takes the lived experience as one act in the totality of consciousness and searches for its meaning. Heidegger (1927/1962) explicitly defines this quest for meaning: “That which has been articulated as such in interpretation and sketched out beforehand in the understanding in general as something articulable, is the meaning” (p. 154). Fourthly, following Gadamer’s explanation of hermeneutic discourse (1960/1984), according to which we must understand the whole on the basis of the part and the part on the basis of the whole, the researcher engaged in the act of understanding must account for the contribution of each part to the whole. Everything is interrelated: the whole is more than the sum of its parts and the whole makes the parts what they are.

This methodological approach affirms an orientation in which the descriptive (phenomenological) and interpretive (hermeneutic) aspects of every reflection are distinct but inseparable elements in a process of clarification. This is how interpretation reconstructs the lived experience behind the discourse and how the philosophical outlook of “*wonder* in the face of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. xiii; italics added) becomes a central pivot in Van Manen’s methodological approach. “Phenomenology not only finds its starting point in wonder, it must also induce wonder” (Van Manen, 1990/1997, pp. 44-45). This evocation of wonder refers to a kind of attentiveness to a lived experience and becomes the central methodological feature of phenomenological inquiry.

The originality of Van Manen’s approach lies in his translation of the epistemological foundations of the

philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer into an educational research methodology that directs our attention to lived experience (1984, 1990/1997). The emphasis is on the person who experiences a phenomenon, and not on just the phenomenon as an object in itself. This approach targets the individual’s understanding from the experiential reality of his lifeworld, which encompasses the experience of the feeling body (corporeality), of subjective rather than objective time (temporality), of space that is felt rather than physical (spatiality), and of relations established in the space shared with others (relationality) (Van Manen, 1990/1997). The existential way approaches a phenomenon – that is, whatever manifests itself to consciousness – in its lived aspect, with the intention first and foremost of understanding not its causes but the meaning the phenomenon takes on in human experience. For the purpose of understanding a phenomenon described by those who have experienced it, this hermeneutic phenomenological dynamic offers an original and relevant framework: it makes it possible to look more closely at the existential dimensions of the lived experience in order to access its essential qualities and to formulate an intersubjective reflection through interpretation. The listening and reflecting that are the central pillars of this kind of dialogue do not merely constitute passive reflection but illuminate thinking.

The researcher interested in adolescents must show great flexibility and undertake each interview with a minimum of structure (Boutin, 1997, pp. 87–90). In the narrative journal, each subject/collaborator tells about a destabilizing event and coping behaviour, and how he or she internalizes space, time, place and relation to others. A semi-directed interview makes it possible to focus each person’s remarks on the existential aspects while encouraging the emergence of new aspects not anticipated by the researcher at the beginning: How did your body react when you had to face that particular situation? How would you describe the passage of time? How did the place where you had this experience appear to you? How did the things and objects around you appear? When you had this experience, how did you perceive the others around you? How did you act towards them? What helps you the most in moments like that? How do you recognize what is harmful to you? Can you give me an example?

Even when alone, a person can experience a sense of dialogue with himself or herself if an attitude of openness to question and response is present, as it was for the young people when they were collecting their thoughts and reflections in a journal. The discursive path of these writings allows for the explanation of significant stress events that punctuate

everyday life and the ways they were coped with, as well as for an existential rather than analytical exploration of them. This is the framework for the description/interpretation of the existential material gathered.

There is no temporal distinction between analysis and interpretation, since both processes occur at the same time. The two steps consist, firstly, of familiarization with the word-for-word transcription of the six subjects'/collaborators' narratives as well as their journal writings, which have the same value as their spoken accounts. The second step is to draw up a preliminary version of each history with the goal of answering the following question: "What is in the discourse of each of these young people, or what are they dealing with here, and are there any existential elements that enrich their daily life experience and can encourage a more nuanced description of their experience?" After drafting a version of each history, the third step is to return to the subjects/collaborators, since, according to Van Manen (1990/1997), only the person concerned can clarify and answer this request for co-construction of meaning: "Is this what the experience is really like?" (p. 99).

### **New Horizons through Existentials: Moving from the Empirical to the Phenomenal**

The type of knowledge sought in phenomenological research is the understanding of a lived experience through the revelation of its meaning. For a qualitative/interpretive study rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology, understanding is the attribution of meaning to a phenomenon; it refers to a vision of the world whose principal characteristic is the existence of meaning. "Not an ordered universe, nor nature as the object of study for science, the world for the subject is *what appears to him*" (Zielinski, 2002, p. 9; my translation; italics added). Since "this world" is not given as an object in any experience, the phenomenal rather than the empirical dimension is the chosen one.

The lived experience of stress-coping as an existential phenomenon does not present itself as a behaviour, feeling or emotion, but rather reveals itself through these. However, it is through the "existentials" that man is understood in the existential fullness that Heidegger called *Dasein*, or being-there<sup>1</sup>. According to Van Manen (1990/1997), temporality, corporeality,

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger's philosophy is built on a particular conception of language. He linked old German words with contemporary words in their etymological sense. The word *Dasein*, or being-there, means that the human presence is intentional.

spatiality and relationality "pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings, regardless of their historical, cultural or social situatedness" (p. 101). Implicitly, they clarify the link to self, others and the world as "links that are not analytical, synthetic nor dialectical, but intentional" (Guérin, 1998, p. 159; my translation). We must therefore abandon the empirical view for the phenomenological, setting aside the search for a certain understanding of a physical world and turning our way of understanding the world towards consciousness as it focuses on the world.

Corporeality, spatiality and temporality are the boundaries of the solitary self in the lived experience of stress-coping. This solitary dimension is the interior space where needs, emotions, perceptions, feelings, values, thoughts, consciousness and transformations are articulated. In this interior space, the uniqueness of the person, his or her personal way of living, manifests itself (Van Manen, 1990/1997, p. 104). We thus come to understand why Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) presents consciousness as a spectrum of presences: presence in oneself, presence in others, and presence in the world.

The lifeworld (*lebenswelt*), which refers to the world of lived experience or the phenomenological world, implies that human beings are part of an historical context that they share with other human beings. Relationality corresponds to the concrete established connections beyond the separation of beings and implies a space made up of situations, thoughts, words and gestures (Van Manen, 1990/1997, p. 104). Subjectivity can thus be understood in the relational webs of intersubjectivity, with intersubjectivity integrating subjectivities in webs of social relations. We cannot understand one without the other. "Prior to any description we might make of our existence, we are already in a world, world with others" (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nyström, 2001, p. 63). Each person becomes human in the encounter with others.

Relationality refers to the connection with the outside world, which suggests an interaction that draws upon extended relational space: the family, school, groups of friends, and culture. One aspect of this relational space is expansive, as Merleau-Ponty (2001) makes clear: ". . . to live an experience that is broader than the strictly individual" (p. 93; my translation). We rediscover our presence in the outside world through the value of personal relations with others, which engenders a transformation of our relations with the group, school, society and the future. This existential dimension, which accounts for the relationship with others, complements those affecting the relationship with the self: together they constitute an indivisible whole. As Van Manen (1990/1997) points out,

These four existentials of lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relation to the other can be differentiated but not separated. They all form an intricate unity which we call the lifeworld – our lived world. (p. 105)

### **A Revelation that Suggests rather than Concludes: Inexhaustible Meaning and Disclosure of a Lived Experience**

This interpretation aims to bring out the unique and overlapping aspects highlighted in each history. The point is not to give an exhaustive account of the meaning of each of the experiences lived and described by Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille, nor to create a synthesis that would give the whole meaning. In the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, human understanding can never be complete. Zielinski alludes to “what is impossible to comprehend in total” (2002, p. 36; my translation), not in the sense of what is impossible to think of, but of what remains latent, what still and always remains to be thought of. For Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), the perception of things has no end. There is always room for new perceptions that can define the indeterminate more fully. All perceptions can be broadened, and so the process is unending (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2002).

To say that meaning is built over time implies, in the context of this study, going beyond a subjective activity towards an intersubjective and reflective one in which each young person is intensely involved. The phenomenological dimensions made it possible, via description, to move from mere introspection to an evolving construction of meaning. The ideas that emerged result from a process constantly swinging between subjectivity and intersubjectivity to produce an understanding of part of the human experience of stress-coping, retaining the existential dimensions as referents. Thus there is nothing in the sense of a thing – in this case, stress-coping – but communication with a way of being via spatiality, temporality, corporeality and relationality.

#### *The Spatiality of the Lived Experience of Stress-Coping: Going Alone into a Space of Solitude*

The existential dimension of spatiality or lived space refers to the qualitative nature of space and its appearance as a context for individuals' actions in and on the environment. Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille brought out the fact that both their collective life at school and their personal lives in their families took place in a defined space that made them aware of an interior lived space existing

beside the relational space.

In the dimension of spatiality, the lived experience of stress-coping corresponds to going alone into a space of solitude. The inner space that opens up is not defined by physical dimensions, but comes from the dynamic of knowing how to withdraw and be present at the same time. When a person becomes ‘stressed out’, it is a solitary experience in which he or she must confront the world. So the essential thing for each person is not a sterile management of time, but to manage this “inner space” and give time a meaning. Each person enters this world alone, opening up first to the self and afterwards to others and the world. This dynamic has a vitality that may be related to personal growth, within its own limits.

If space exists in reference to a subject who perceives the environment, this “inner space” exists through what both fills it and structures it with values and reference points. This solitary place allows people to deal with what is facing them while simultaneously enabling new elements to be revealed. This deserted space refers to what is born in each person, what each person learns about him/herself. It is at once a mould and a womb, accepting and creating reciprocally.

Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille take refuge in this space, which condenses and protects their privacy, to reflect on their plans and their dreams as well as their doubts and sometimes their peripheral sorrows. They sojourn there, giving themselves the gift of time and this chosen space until they feel ready to return to the distractions of the exterior world. In spite of the chaos outside, each of them experiences a feeling of completeness – finding a way into peace and silence within themselves.

#### *The Temporality of the Lived Experience of Stress-Coping: A Continual Structuring of Present and Future from Past Events*

When Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille see something as threatening and unwelcoming, time stretches out. By virtue of their continuous experience, all of them are shaped by the various things they have learned as they have developed. They have stockpiled an incalculable amount of experiences and information that in some way constitutes their personal data base. All this knowledge is there when they perceive a stressful situation, or decode situational issues. All this equipment, constituting their continuous experience, gives form to the present. It is as if, by their perception, the past shapes the present. In this way, stress-coping becomes a lived personal reality, embodying detachment and openness at the same time.

A dialectic was always present in the oral and written narratives, that of the inseparability of operative and existential temporalities. Operative time for these young people frames various future projects that arise out of intense involvement in their school and extracurricular activities. At the same time, existential time is expressed in their apprehensions, anxieties, fears and even their dreams. Each one follows a path that is therefore part of a dual temporality: existential time expressed in their apprehensions, preoccupations, curiosities and ambitions, and operative time framing their future personal and work plans.

In common parlance, we refer to time that consumes, fatigues and wears us out. In the scientific discourse about stress-coping, everything ages, deteriorates and even disappears with time. Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille talk about time for learning, time for growing up via various experiences, time for thinking about future plans, investing their energy freely in order to achieve established goals, building innovatively and creatively, becoming flexible and wise. They experience stress as an initiatory path towards understanding themselves and the world.

Stress-coping, as an existential phenomenon rather than an empirical reality, offers young people an additional way of seeing, in which their lives unfold in a present and future formed but not determined by the past. "It is better to say that the experience is incorporated in our being, and in consequence transforms it, and that it is in this sense that it continues to live on in us" (Marcel, 1952, p. 178). This dimension of temporality that Marcel alludes to accounts for a past that is retained as it is transformed and lives on in the individual, "just as in melody the first notes are transformed by those which follow and are given a value they could not have had by themselves" (Marcel, 1952, p. 150). Understanding their lived experience "is no longer a way of knowing but a way of being, the way of someone for whom knowing is part of existence" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 7).

#### *Corporeality of the Lived Experience of Stress-Coping: Fear as a Paradoxically Mobilizing Energy*

In the discursive narratives of Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille, fear intensifies in several of the experiences they describe; it is part of a dialectic. In the existential dimension of corporeality, fear is not necessarily negative. It is paradoxically experienced as energizing. The young people report bodily sensations, in the form of muscular tensions and physical symptoms: Antoine – "legs tremble", "pressure in my throat/chest", "headache"; Claudia "there's a knot inside",

"everything is really tight inside", "my legs become tense"; Mario – "rapid pulse", "heart struggling deep inside", "goose bumps"; Sarah – "tension in my neck", "I get stiff", "I move around all the time"; Sébastien – "my shoulders get tight", "I move quickly", "I get awkward"; Kamille – "I have trouble breathing", "not really hungry", "stomach tenses up". These sensations stimulate them, keeping them on guard against a world that might be threatening; but, at the same time, insofar as they may open a door to the unknown, these sensations are also a revealing light that can illuminate an entire aspect of life.

As an emotional state with a marked affective nature, fear is associated with an awareness of real or imagined danger. More precisely, in the psychological or psychiatric literature, fear is related to an often devastating energy. Furthermore, in the tradition of Selye's work on the theory of the general adaptation syndrome, fear is central, allowing human beings to establish a defence mechanism against the aggressor (fight or flight), without which the species would not have been able to survive (Selye, 1956, 1974). From the philosophical point of view, Jonas (1998) speaks of the hermeneutics of fear as an understanding of risk. According to this disciple of Heidegger, fear, beyond being a feeling, is a faculty for self-reflection and knowledge. The dialogue with each subject/collaborator makes it possible to see this emotion as an ally. As such, it casts an enlightened look on fear in its positive and mobilizing aspect, thus making the classical discourse more meaningful.

Fear, as Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille point out, also provides a feeling of being fully alive and present in the world. From this point of view, lived fear is not to be avoided or run away from or even diverted, but becomes inviting, a mobilizing force. For these adolescents, it is a frame of mind that preferentially reveals, on an intimate and elementary level, *Dasein* itself (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Fear is also painful; in reality, when they face a situation that is too much for them, and even with a full range of assistance, they sometimes flounder. Yet, from the point of view of fear as a mobilizing force, each student reveals the inseparable link between stress and coping.

In the detailed description of their various ways of managing destabilizing situations, as well as in communicating their continuous reflections both orally and in writing, Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille express a possibility of control rather than a real control. This possibility indicates a feeling of being in a state of control rather than of actually exercising control. From this angle, they present a revitalized picture of coping as an ability to

face any situation with equilibrium.

*The Relationality of the Lived Experience of Stress-Coping: The Ritual of Reconciliation in the Apparent Normalcy of School Life*

For Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille, the learning environment is first of all a time and space shared with others. While the transmission of academic material is important, they insist on the quality and nature of the transactions. In fact, the issues in this time/space are not exclusively educational, as Ittelson (cited in Jutras, 2002) points out: “The environment is a whole that binds, surrounds and envelops so that nothing and no one can be defined as not being part of it” (p. 492; my translation). In this space shared with others, relationships with others and with the self are brought into play, as Charlot describes (1997, p. 91). The class therefore becomes a life environment within which the dimension of relationality is omnipresent. We can say that the relationship to knowledge, according to these healthy adolescents, is at the same time a relationship to others. They all recognize that they are always in relation to this “other”, which in a way becomes indispensable for enabling them not only to exist, but also to know that they exist.

The phenomenon of stress-coping is put back in the place and context where it occurs, the school environment itself. This relational process between student and institution may help to further our understanding of the problem, because it clarifies the undeniable link between the environmental variables and the human experience as it is lived by the young people themselves. From this point of view, stress-coping is part of a phenomenon that appears in a given, well-defined environment; what needs to be recognized is thus that the way this environment is organized, and the nature of the relationships that are created there, can contribute to the stress that adolescents experience. As such, the epistemological coherence is strengthened – the environment only has meaning and existence in terms of the significance the individual attributes to it.

**Identifying New Frontiers: Enriching the Scientific Discourse**

Integrating corporeality, spatiality, temporality, relationality and change in the lifeworld contributes to the contemporary scientific discourse on stress and coping. Antoine, Claudia, Mario, Sarah, Sébastien and Kamille’s discourse shows that they have gone beyond dual thought. Since experienced stress is not positive or negative, adjustment mechanisms are not good or bad. They can be beneficial to the individual,

opening up projects that lead to self-realization. Be that as it may, this understanding of a unified being-in-the-world, or *Dasein*, depends not only on the subjects, but also on those around them and their interactions. Accordingly, this intersubjective understanding makes it possible to realize that a phenomenon like stress-coping, which science considers disturbing, can also contribute to the person’s integration, for it affects all aspects of the human condition. What the young people shared in their oral and written narratives emphasized a dialectical vision of life in preference to the more common linear and dual logic based on exclusive categories.

The meaning of the lived experience of stress-coping as it is revealed allows us to put into perspective the fact that every experience, however individual, helps us to know more about what this experience really is. Wittgenstein (1953/1973) introduced the concept of *family resemblance* to describe experiences that are not identical but nevertheless share some common characteristics. Merleau-Ponty reminds us that “We will arrive at the universal not by abandoning our particularity but by turning it into a way of reaching others, by virtue of that mysterious affinity which makes situations mutually understandable” (1964/1968, p. 92). This is why bringing out the meaning in this way makes it possible to think of a common world, rather than being limited to thinking about it as a private world that each individual alone is able to interpret. The phenomenon of stress-coping is a common experience that has a particular colouration for each individual.

Through consciousness, these young people’s lived experience of stress-coping, although personal, at the same time transcends the merely biographical. These experiences could be anyone’s: “These are all experiences that could be yours or mine, not because we have all lived through them but because we are human and nothing human is alien to us” (Van Manen, 2002, p. ii). Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) defines this private/common dialectic further: “It is therefore indeed true that the *private worlds* communicate, that each of them is given to its incumbent as a variant of one common world” (p. 11; italics added).

The meaning that emerges from the lived experience of healthy 15 to 17 year old adolescents now becomes a form of knowledge contributing to the scientific discourse on stress-coping. The existential way of thinking about this phenomenon points to an action, not routine but creative, that contributes to the development of human potential. It also recognizes that these healthy adolescents do not live merely by acquiring practical living skills in order to cope with



their daily stress, but that they also strive for a meaningful life. The phenomenon of stress-coping, as the young people approach it, thus goes beyond a concept and offers us a living process: it is established in their daily lives as an essential element, not an obstacle. Thus the existential dimensions of this phenomenon are integral to the contemporary scientific discourse on the lived experience of being what is colloquially termed “stressed-out”.

### Identifying New Frontiers: Transforming our View

Conducting a research study that will give young people a voice requires above all an attitude of openness and wonder that allows us to become involved with questioning of a kind that does not lead to solutions but to glimpses of meaning and emerging perspectives. The words of the six healthy adolescents in the present study make it possible to revisit the lived experience of stress-coping in order to grasp what somehow escapes the classifications and explanations imposed by the reflection of adults and scientific experts, that is, the primacy of the adult-centred or andragogic discourse. From this point of view, the phenomenological agenda offers a new perspective: existential dimensions make it possible to understand stress-coping as a human experience that is lived and shared by the people involved. Their lifeworld reflects their way of being in the world through temporality, spatiality, corporality and the meaningful interpersonal connections that they have created in the world through relationality. The

hermeneutic focus helps to increase the understanding of a lived experience without necessarily claiming to reach a conclusion in the positivist sense. This approach to educational research, inspired by European philosophy, does not try to replace one world view with another. Rather, it proposes a transformation of our way of looking at things through which the reflected view both includes and goes beyond what Merleau-Ponty calls “the naïve view of the world” (1945/1962, p. 213). The taken for granted is laid bare and that which was silent may be heard.

Choosing to do a hermeneutic phenomenological study makes the researcher a “seeker”, someone who welcomes the new and looks out for the unexpected in the familiarity of daily life. In essence, the researcher’s mission is to conjure up a return to what was forgotten or left behind, to see beneath the surface ordinariness of a phenomenon like the lived experience of stress-coping, to give an account of a world in which and before which we are situated. Specifically, this kind of human science research has, in this instance, enabled us to explore and become somewhat more familiar with the lifeworld of healthy adolescents. The updated understanding it offers of the meaning of stress-coping for adolescents includes an emergent focus on their struggling with life’s challenges. Thus, this research focus and approach addresses a gap in our understanding of how healthy adolescents cope with stress and, as such, may be useful in facilitating the development of early stress interventions in the school and family settings.

### About the Author



Renée Guimond-Plourde is a registered nurse and Professor in the Department of Education, Kinesiology and Recreology at the Université de Moncton Campus d’Edmundston (UMCE) in New Brunswick, Canada. Her teaching areas include health promotion in primary and secondary schools and the psychopedagogy of adolescents and children. Her area of particular interest and expertise lies in phenomenology as a methodology for the study of stress-coping as lived by adolescents and children. She holds a number of grants and awards in support of her qualitative research projects, including “Le prix d’excellence Jean Marie van Der Maren”, awarded for an outstanding Honours Thesis (2005), and the First Pat Clifford Award for Early Career Research in Education granted by the Canadian Education Association (2009). She has been awarded a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant for 2009-2011 for a project entitled “The phenomenology of stress-coping: The voice of healthy university students from a French-speaking minority community”.

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