Summary

Background and research question

Globally, and particularly in rapidly developing countries such as India, stress and related mental health issues have become a prominent public health concern among youth. In India, suicide has been one of the top three causes of death among youth in the age bracket 19 to 25 years old, and stress and depression are among the leading causes of illness and disability in the lives of adolescents. As youth are at the crucial stage of maturation and increased independence, these mental health problems bring up serious concerns related to personal wellbeing, often affecting aspects of economic, family and social life.

While, globally, mental health problems are mostly witnessed in low- and middle income countries (WHO, 2001), the burden is not necessarily only experienced by the poorest groups. In India, for instance, suicide rates are noticeably high among higher-educated people, and highest in the richer (Southern) states. Equally, there are many studies who notify the elevated levels of stress, depression and anxiety experienced among middle-class youth, most notably students. Furthermore, a dirt of Indian studies have continuously shown the relation between stress and education, indicating particularly the influence of competition, academic pressure from parents, parent-child conflicts as well as the effect of peer relations on wellbeing of students. More specifically, stress in youth (often described as ‘academic stress’) has been explained by fears of failure, exam results, as well as features of modernization (including e.g. substance use and increased individualization in society) often seen in students living in urban, middle-class contexts.

Regarding the latter, India has seen major social-economic changes, particularly after the economic reforms which opened up India’s market to increased global foreign exchange of goods, ideas and knowledge. The withdrawing influence of the State and increased reliance on international economies forced Indian industries to modernize, become more specialized and rapidly grow, making India one of the fastest growing large economies in the world. Liberalization has also had an accelerated impact on the growth of the new middle class, the influx and spread of the Internet, ICT and mass media, and, simultaneously, the distribution of various ‘Western’ values such as individualism and meritocracy.

Similarly, features of the current academic system, features of family life in Indian society, as well as the mental health responses that are available for Indian youth today, seem to play a role in affecting the mental health status of many Indian youth. Academically, students are generally pushed to adhere to a relatively rigid form of rote learning, with tedious examination processes and, what results into, an intense competition between peers to gain placement into one of the reputed universities in order to obtain the required qualifications to secure a job in the future. Families, and particularly parents, are often described as a major part of the issue, as they are the first to install a sense of (academic) achievement in their children, spurring them on to take up extra-curricular activities and private classes and comparing their results with other peers. Whenever students feel a sense of loneliness, anxiety or depression, this is likely to go unnoticed and/or untreated as the mental health system is still in its infancy in India. This has mainly to do with the history of political neglect towards mental health in India, which has led to a situation where only 0-3 psychiatrists per 100,000 people were available in 2013, and between 1-5 clinical psychologists per 100,000 people; accounting for a staggering deficit of about 97 percent.

It is in the absence of sufficient governmental support and scarcity of public health resources, that the treatment gap has therefore been mostly responded to by the private sector (mainly in the cities), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and community workers, following the practices of Community-Based Health (CBH). Learning from CBH practices could therefore be urgently required to effectively reduce the burden of mental health problems for people in India. There is a general consensus that many of the mental, behavioral and psychological problems that exist in Indian youth could be averted if interventions would take place at an early stage, for instance through population-based interventions with students (in school settings) as well as other actors in the community.

Considering the complex and dynamic relationships that exist between societal actors and factors that continue to impact the wellbeing of Indian students, similarly, the way stress is addressed requires a socio-ecological approach that is sufficiently comprehensive to evoke sustainable change. As such, this thesis is concerned with understanding and addressing stress from a social-ecological perspective, aimed at reducing academic stress in Indian, middle-class youth in Pune, a relatively large city in the state of Maharashtra, India. It is in the context of this rapidly expanding educational hub (often referred to as the Oxford of the East) that this transdisciplinary research was implemented, following the steps of an Interactive Learning in Action (ILA) approach, in order to develop, evaluate and scale-up Community-Based Health initiatives for the promotion of mental wellbeing in Indian students between 15 and 24 years old. The main research question to be addressed by this thesis comprises:

“How can academic stress in middle-class, urban India, be understood and addressed from a social-ecological perspective?”

The approach of this thesis is intentionally interventionist and aims to both understand (part 1) and develop socially embedded solutions (part 2) to the issue of academic stress. In doing so, I relied on the close collaboration with a Pune-based suicide prevention NGO, as well as various mental health professionals, parents, teachers as well as students.

Part I: Understanding academic stress

Part I aims to answer the following research questions:

1a) How do middle-class Indian students experience and cope with stress in the context of their academic development?
1b) What role does the social-ecological system play in either stimulating or reducing stress in students?

To address this question, and as part of the first stages of the ILA process, I undertook three different studies aimed at exploring the 1) self-reported experiences of stress and related problems of Indian students over the course of their academic career, 2) the perspectives and experiences of parents regarding parenting stress, parental pressures and their hopes and expectations regarding the future of their children, 3) the perspectives and experiences of unschooling parents (parents who choose to not send their children to school) regarding the issue of academic stress and the role of parenting and education in the same.

More specifically, regarding the first study (chapter 4), me and my colleague employed a Life Course Perspective to understand how stress experienced by students can be traced back to surrounding social structures and people’s locations within them, which can change over time. Based on in-depth timeline interviews with 12 students as well as a focus group discussion with somewhat 8 students, we were able to abstract a number of personal and more commonly experienced events that caused stress in the students, including stressful role transitions, health issues, academic failures and conflicts with peers or parents. We also reflect upon the mediating factors that play an important role in how intensely stressful these events are experienced, including social networks, coping styles and mastery.

Regarding mediating factors, we saw that students are often limited in using their social environment for emotional support, either due to personal factors (self-esteem, level of openness, communication skills, etc.), or the absence of ‘good friends’ and ‘accepting parents’ in the prevailing culture. For some students, a sense of disconnection led to feelings of loneliness and depression. In terms of coping, we distinguished three separate pathways of approaches in self-reports of students, from which they (implicitly) choose: 1) a social vs individual approach, 2) an avoiding vs attacking approach, and 3) a denial vs accepting approach. Finally, we witnessed that some students, over the course of time, had developed a sense of mastery and locus of control, which enabled them to look at their situation with more clarity and responsibility.

With regards to the second study (chapter 5), we aimed to understand the deeper causes of parental pressures on children (which can lead to academic stress) by specifically looking at parenting stress as expressed by various actors, as well as experienced by parents themselves, and the emotions, needs and fears underling parenting behaviour. Through a qualitative study including in-depth interviews and focus-groups with parents, high-school students, mental health professionals, teachers and educational experts, we were able to find three commonly perceived parenting issues which lead to parenting stress, comprising 1) the education system and societal pressures to ‘not fall behind’, 2) the generation gap and increased complexities with living in modern cities and 3) emancipation and changing family structures. The results are discussed in the broader social-ecological context of India, referring to aspects of social, cultural, political and economic importance.

Finally, regarding the third study (chapter 6), we employed a narrative approach to explore how, based on the parenting journey of three families, stress can be understood in the context of unschooling. Three in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the motivations and experiences of parents who do not send their children to school in relation to the concept of academic stress. Two important results from this study reflect the ambiguity and subjective nature of the concept of ‘stress’ and how stress is a natural part of the human development process regardless of the influence of formal schooling. It also shows that formal schooling, in the way that it is currently practiced in India, brings up critical questions regarding how education benefits the overall wellbeing and intrinsic motivation for learning in children. As such, unschooling allow their children to follow their own natural learning process. In these contexts, children experience stress as a creative energy resulting from a self-induced quest for improvement or transformation, and less as a product of educational processes which subject students to aspects of standardization, achievement, competition and comparison as often described as part of the formal education sector.

Part II: Addressing stress from a socio-ecological perspective

The second part of this thesis comprises four chapters and attempts to respond to the following research questions:

2a) What factors play a role in the development of social-ecologically sensitive interventions that help to prevent academic stress?

2b) How can the mechanisms of interventions be shared in other contexts in order to proliferate their potentially positive outcomes?

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 reflect on the development and results of three distinct interventions aimed at reducing stress and related mental health issues in Indian youth. In the first study we reflect on the development and implementation of a university-based stress management program in two different universities in Pune. The program comprised of four sessions developed to address challenges commonly experienced by students, including fear of failure and low self-esteem, conflicts with peers and friends, and various issues related to academics and daily life struggles. Research-based methods such as Emotional Freedom Technique, Interplay, and Arts-Based therapy (e.g. poetry) were used to evoke a sense of relaxation, reflection and play in students. Baseline study results indicate a significant drop in self-reported stress after the program, and qualitative data reflect the overall positive feedback from the participating students, as well as high acceptability from teachers and school authorities.

In Chapter 8 we describe the development and results of a Creative Stress-Relief Program for parents based on a Theory of Change (ToC). In the ToC, the objectives of parents, as well as the pathway of change to relief parents from excess stress and improve relevant parenting practices, are visualised and described. More specifically, the ToC depicts the theory-based methods employed in this particular context to support parents in their learning process, including e.g. Non-Violent Communication and Rational Behavioural Emotional Therapy (REBT) principles, to evoke change. Qualitative data collected before and after the program show that, after the program, parents were able to
spend more and improved quality time together as a family, communicate more dialogically with their children as well as partners, and overall had felt a sense of comfort in sharing their challenges with other parents.

In Chapter 9, we evaluate the effects of a Peer-Education Program (PEP) aimed at reducing suicidality, depression and anxiety in students and implemented in 8 different high schools in Pune. The objective was to explore the effects of the PEP program on the development of students who were involved as Peer Educators (PEs), based on the perspectives of parents, teachers and students. More specifically, this study studies how PE’s were motivated, empowered and otherwise impacted through the trainings they receive during their involvement. Results show that the SALT trainings, focused on e.g. aspects of empathy, self-healing, appreciative listening and leadership, empower PEs to effectively respond to the needs of themselves and their peers, but also, in relation to other actors in their broader environment.

Finally, in Chapter 10, I address the issue of upscaling, and the question of how lessons derived from the aforementioned programs can be shared with a wider community. For this project, four parenting videos were developed based on transformative stories for parents with children in the age groups 0-6, 6-12, 12-18 and young adults of 18-24 years old. For this study, we employed 8 different focus groups to evaluate the impact of these videos on parents on aspects of vicarious learning and therapeutic benefits. Results from this explorative study indicate that videos, when sensitively developed, are a good medium to evoke learning and therapeutic priming in parents regarding various parenting issues. At the same time, similar to the parenting programs, videos can provide a sense of comfort and relief to parents, as they share their parenting challenges with the fictional characters in the film, as well as other parents in the group. Regarding the last point, it is recommended to use videos in combination, or as complementary to parenting workshops, therapy sessions, or in parent discussion groups to evoke lasting change.

**Main findings and conclusions**

The focus of this thesis was on improving the well-being of students, through the development of several distinct interventions, and explore how these could improve several aspects of the social-ecological environment that were found to be related to academic stress in urban, middle-class India. In the discussion, I relate to these interventions as ‘niche experiments’, a term borrowed from System Innovation and Strategic Niche Management (SNM) to explain how, in the context of protected spaces (e.g. a school, university or parenting workshop), local knowledge and resources can be used to create socially acceptable (robust) solutions to the issue of academic stress, and eventually create ‘a ripple of change’ through the diffusion of learned lessons.

With regards to the facilitation of change processes, I discuss in depth the concept of empowerment, and particularly, what I call, ‘double empowerment-loops’ in socio-ecological contexts, to understand how an effective power balance can be maintained in the context of intervention programs. Double empowerment loops occur when facilitators or trainers aim to empower participants, who, in turn, obtain a role in empowering others (e.g. empowering parents to evoke a sense of independence and autonomy in their children). I suggest that that programs which (implicitly) create double-empowerment loops arguably require tools to identify the current level of understanding and attitudes of participants, as well as facilitators, to define the best starting position for the intervention and identify the most proximal successive step away from that level.

I conclude by addressing the lessons that practitioners in the field of CBH could take from this thesis, first asserting that continuous attention to the relational aspects involved in personal stress is required to understand the deeper causes of stress in each new context. Secondly, finding and employing psychological theories that are focused on ‘individual appraisal mechanisms’ (including fundamental fears and values) and exercises based on experiential learning, creativity and play, are shown to be useful in empowering individuals to address stress in urban, middle-class societies (instead of providing ready-made answers or coping strategies to deal with stress). Particularly in the context of modernization, a lot of stress, internal chaos, conflict and doubts can be evoked, requiring a certain amount of reflexivity in people in order to remain connected to the world around them. In many quickly modernizing contexts (including other Asian countries for instance) similar issues might be encountered, and for which the outcomes of this thesis might also be useful.

Finally, with regards to the methods employed in health-promotion interventions, I recommend professionals to make use of locally available resources and knowledge, as well as to find readily available entry points to effectively engage and reach out to people, such as schools and universities. I also state the importance of continuous learning within such spaces, by stimulating the adoption of successful program features into the broader regime (e.g. the curriculum, examination processes, and overall structure of educational Institutes). As such, I conclude by endorsing further research that focuses on the practice of learning for wellbeing, with concepts such as ‘holistic approach’, ‘interactive learning’, ‘self-evaluation’ and ‘school-family partnerships’ as more integral, effective and sustainable solutions to stress, and other related mental health concerns, in students, not just in India, but many other contexts alike.