

# The Influence of Previous Traumatic Experiences on Haitian Child Refugees' Conceptualization of Fear

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**ABSTRACT:** This study investigates how children's experiences as Haitian refugees influence the development of atypical childhood fears. Eighteen child refugees were interviewed about their personal primary fear objects and their interpretation of fear in a series of drawing and picture observation exercises. Five of these eighteen children were Haitian refugees. Each of the refugee children had one adult representative who was interviewed about the child, the family's demographic information, and the child's previous traumatic experiences in his/her native country. The refugee children and their adult representatives' responses to the interview questions were coded and analyzed according to themes. Results suggest that Haitian refugee children have a higher rate of moderately life-threatening and life-threatening previous traumatic experiences. Results also indicate that the majority of Haitian refugee children reported amphibians as their primary fear objects, suggesting that the geographic location and characteristics of Haiti contribute to the development of Haitian children's primary fear objects. While animal and imaginary/cultural creatures may be the most prominently identified and interpreted Haitian fear, Haitian refugee children may interpret more life-threatening fears when prompted by the image of a child under a tree.

**KEYWORDS:** refugees, Haiti, trauma, fear, children, cultural awareness

## INTRODUCTION

Immigrated, diversified family systems are a prominent population within the United States (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008). In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the arrival of families of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. One of the most vulnerable and at-risk subsets of the global population are refugees (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008). Refugees are defined “as individuals outside their country of origins who fear persecution related to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010, p. 14). Refugee children and their families are forced to flee their native country in hopes of asylum in a new host country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2002). An estimated 15.2 million refugees exist worldwide, nearly half of whom are children and adolescents (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011).

The refugee experience is frequently characterized by increased exposure to war, conflict, and trauma in comparison to the experiences of non-refugee individuals (Fantino & Colak, 2001). The child refugee experience is unique to adult refugees, in that they are subjected to adult problems and experiences that are developmentally beyond their understanding and ability (Bash & Zezlina-Phillips, 2006). Strekalova and Hoot (2008) theorize that child refugees’ behavior and interpretations of their world and environment may be atypical in comparison to other immigrant or American-born children. Research has shown that children’s previous traumatic experiences may have been a negative impact on their psychological development (Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009). One way in which children frequently react to traumatic exposure is through the development of fear (National Institute of Mental Health, 2002).

A childhood fear can be defined as a child’s “adaptive reaction to real or imagined threat” (Gullone, 1996, p. 144). The development of fear is a normal component of childhood (Morris & Kratochwill, 1985). However, when children express and rely upon their fears in excess, maladaptive reactions and inhibition of development can occur (Craske, 1997). The most frequently reported maladaptive reactions to childhood fear include “regression, irritability, insomnia, depression, aggression, poor school performance, and poor social and peer relationships” (Yearwood, 2003, p. 131). The development of childhood fears is characteristically influenced by

a child’s frequent exposure to specific experiences (Burnham, 2009). Burnham (2009) cites global situations such as war, trauma, disease, and disasters as prominent sources of fear development for children.

In a cross-cultural study performed by Burnham and Gullone (1997), results indicated that a sample of American and Australian children shared more similarities in their most frequently reported fears (i.e. “not being able to breathe,” “being kidnapped,” “someone in my family dying,” and “myself dying”) than differences. However, the researchers also suggested that the differences reported between the fears of American versus Australian children may derive from specific cultural influences, such as nationally prevalent societal issues and the location and geographic characteristics of a country. For example, American children were the only participants in the study who reported the fear of “murderers” frequently, and Australian children were the only participants in the study who reported the fear of “sharks” frequently.

Lahikainen and Kraav (1996) argue that fear is a crucial component of a child’s insecurity. Children use their fears to make sense of their relationship with their external world. Childhood fears are mediated both culturally and socially (Ollendick, Yule, & Ollier, 1991; Ollendick, Yang, King, Dong, & Akande, 1996); therefore, children’s fears are a depiction of their insecurity in relation to their external world (Lahikainen & Kraav, 1996; Taimalu, Lahikainen, Korhonen, Kraav, 2007). The refugee experience is inherently accompanied by abundant uncertainty (Daiute & Lucić, 2010). The process of seeking and gaining asylum in a new country can be a long and indefinite process (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2013), and upon resettlement a refugee child typically experiences new uncertainties in regard to their family’s living arrangements, employment status, and overall acculturation to the United States (Landale, Thomas, & Van Hook, 2011).

The development of a refugee child’s fears can be viewed as a representation of a way in which the refugee experience influences the normal development of a child. Another way in which fear can be observed in refugee children is in how refugee children interpret fear and danger in a situation. Backett-Milburn and Harden (2004) found that children develop their personal constructs of risk and danger based on familial experiences. The study showed that children learn to negotiate threats against one’s safety by interacting with their family and inadvertently

being influenced by their individual family member's life experiences (Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004). Therefore, a child refugee's ability to interpret fear based on their personal comprehension of risks may weigh heavily upon not only their own refugee experience, but also on the experiences of other members of their family and their reactions to such experiences.

This study investigates the topical components of fear among refugee children. More specifically, this study examines how previous traumatic experiences influenced Haitian refugee children's fears and how they interpreted fear from a picture observation exercise. The authors conducted this exploratory study on Haitian refugee children's experiences due to Haiti's high prevalence rate of crime/violence, natural disaster fatalities/destruction, poverty, and political corruption (Brown & Brown-Murray, 2010).

### HAITIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

The Republic of Haiti is located in the Caribbean Sea, residing in the western area of Hispaniola. The primary languages spoken in Haiti are French and Haitian Creole. Haiti is an impoverished, low-income country. The Haitian economy is considered the poorest economy in the Americas. Haiti has a high illiteracy rate with the majority of its people not reaching the sixth grade level in the education system.

Haiti is a country that has struggled with significant setbacks throughout the course of its history (Brown & Brown-Murray, 2010). Governmental corruption and inadequate access to resources has exposed the Haitian people to significant political violence, such as civilian demonstrations and revolts (Brown & Brown-Murray, 2010). Natural disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, have destroyed much of Haiti's housing and killed and injured many of its people. Statistics collected after the 2010 Haitian earthquake estimated that 316,000 people were killed, 300,000 people were injured, and 1.3 million people were displaced after that natural disaster alone (United States Geological Survey, 2010). Millions of Haitian people are homeless and live outdoors with no access to electricity or clean water. The streets of Haiti have high crime rates, and women and children are frequently targets of violent attacks (Brown & Brown-Murray, 2010).

Despite Haiti's many setbacks, Haiti is rich in its culture and traditions (Bertrand, 2010). Haiti's culture derives from a diverse array of ethnic and cultural beliefs. Folk tales, legends, and Voodoo religious traditions distinctively characterize Haitian culture. Voodoo beliefs and practices commonly observed in Haitian culture foster and promote the influences of a spiritual world (Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002). Many Haitians believe that good and evil spirits eternally live among them. Haitians perform ceremonial practices in the pursuit of worshipping and invoking the spiritual world. The mystical and spiritual beliefs of Haitians have been shown to make them superstitious and mistrustful in nature (Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002). Haitians' Voodoo beliefs and traditions have led to an underlying cultural stigma that individuals who suffer from diseases or mental illnesses are victims of supernatural forces.

### METHODS

#### *Participants*

The sample recruited and surveyed in this study consisted of eighteen refugee children residing in the Central Florida area. Two of the participants were Sudanese, eight were Cuban, one was Venezuelan, three were Vietnamese, and five were Haitian. The participants were recruited voluntarily through contacts with social workers from Catholic Charities of Central Florida, a local refugee resettlement service program. Each family was given a gift card as compensation for participating in the study. As mentioned previously, this study focused on the Haitian children in the study's sample to provide a more in-depth analysis of the unique aspects of the Haitian refugee experience. After IRB permission was obtained for the study, the informed consent and child assent procedures were completed through the collaboration with the refugee resettlement program.

The five Haitian children ranged in age from 8 to 13 ( $M = 11.2$  years of age). Three male and two female Haitian children participated in the study. The five Haitian children were born in Haiti. The children's length of asylum within the United States ranged from 1 to 6 years ( $M = 4.2$  years). All children had some English-language speaking ability, and they all had prior formal educational experience in Haiti. The children came from diverse familial backgrounds, in which they lived with a combination of immediate and extended family ranging from 4 to 7 family members living in a single household ( $M = 5$  people). Each of the Haitian children surveyed in

this study had mothers residing in his or her household, all of whom had previous formal education up to the eighth grade level. Three of the Haitian children had fathers residing in their household, all of whom had previous formal education up to the high school level. The household annual incomes of the Haitian families fell either into the \$10,000-19,999 or the \$40,000-49,000 categories annually.

Research assistants under the supervision of a faculty mentor interviewed the children. A refugee caseworker was also present who served as a translator as needed. The researchers read a questionnaire verbatim to each child in English. All interviews lasted between one and one and half hours. One adult representative from each family was also interviewed for this study by the caseworker.

### *Instruments*

#### **Parent Demographic Questionnaire**

The demographic questionnaire included fifteen questions addressing the history of the child and his or her family. The adult representative of the family completed the demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire included questions about the gender of the parent representative, the gender of the child, the age of the child, the child's grade in school, the child's ethnicity, the child's country of origin, the child's level of English, the prior educational experiences of the child, the total family annual income, the mother's highest level of education, the father's highest level of education, the length of time in the United States, the number of children residing in the household, and the number of people residing in the household. If at any point in the interview process the parent appeared to be uncomfortable with a question, s/he was allowed to stop.

#### **Parent Interview**

The parent interview was structured with a set protocol that was read verbatim by the case worker. Parent representatives answered questions about what primary fear object they thought their children were afraid of, why they thought their children were afraid of that primary fear object, and how often their children appeared to be afraid. The parent representatives were then asked to describe what actions their children performed during and after a fearful situation that indicated that they were afraid. Then, the parents were asked to report how their children calmed down when they experienced fear.

In final portion of the adult interview, the adult representatives were asked to describe any previous traumatic experiences that their children experienced in their native country that may have contributed to their present day fears. The parents' views of their children's previous traumatic experiences ranged in severity and were placed upon a four level scale (no answer, non-life threatening, moderately-life threatening, and life threatening). Independent researchers developed the thematic coding system and conducted a reliability check of this scale, which resulted in 100% agreement.

#### **Draw-And-Tell Identification of Primary Fear Object-Child Interview**

One component of the study's questionnaire involved the child identifying his or her primary fear object. The child was provided with markers and paper to complete the questionnaire, and was given stickers as a reward upon completing the interview. The researchers used a pencil, a list of questions, and a tape recorder to assist them during the interview process. The child was first asked to draw any picture of his/her choice. The researchers would then prompt the child to explain what the picture meant and how it made him/her feel. The researchers recorded verbatim all interview interactions with an audio tape player.

The child was then asked to draw what s/he was most afraid of. The child was provided all the time s/he needed to complete the picture. When the child completed the primary fear object picture, the researchers requested for the child to tell them what the picture meant, how it made him/her feel, and what s/he thought would make him/her feel less scared of the identified primary fear object. The researchers asked the child how s/he was afraid of this fear object and how s/he could be less afraid of it. The participants' answers were recorded verbatim with an audio tape player. If at any point in the interview process the child appeared to be uncomfortable with a question, s/he was allowed to stop.

The child's identification of their primary fear object ranged in topical area and was placed into a thematic coding system (i.e. dark, lack of safety, being alone, nature, animals, imaginary/cultural creatures, scary movies, verbal arguments/disagreements, lack of basic needs). The research assistants developed the thematic coding system and conducted a reliability check of this scale which resulted in 100% agreement.

### Picture Card Fear Object Interpretation–Child Interview

Another component of the study’s questionnaire asked the children to interpret fear upon viewing a provided picture. The first image was that of a child hiding behind a lamppost. First, the researchers informed the participants that the child in the picture shared their age and gender and was afraid. Then, the researchers asked the participants what they believed the children in the picture was afraid of and why the child was afraid. The researchers continued to interview the child in regards to their interpretation of the picture by asking questions such as “How does the child in the picture feel inside when s/he is afraid,” “How does his or her body tell himself or herself that s/he is afraid,” “What is the first thing the boy or girl thinks of when s/he is afraid,” and “What does s/he say to himself or herself when s/he is afraid?” Finally, the researchers asked participants to state what they thought the child in the picture would do when s/he was afraid and what the child in the picture could do to be less afraid. The second image used for this portion of the interview was that of a child sitting underneath a tree. The same protocol and interview questions were utilized for this portion of the interview.

The children’s interpretations of the picture card fear objects ranged in topical area and were placed into the same thematic coding system as identified above (i.e. dark, lack of safety, being alone, nature, animals, imaginary/cultural creatures, scary movies, verbal arguments/disagreements, lack of basic needs). The research assistants developed the same thematic coding system and conducted a reliability check of this scale, which resulted in 100% agreement.

## RESULTS

### *Previous Traumatic Experiences*

The researchers used a three level scale ranging in severity of threat to one’s life to code the eighteen refugee children’s previous traumatic experiences as reported by their parental representatives and summarized in Table 1. All of the Haitian parental representatives responded with examples of traumatic experiences their children had experienced that they believed led to their present-day fears. Many responded with multiple examples of previous traumas. The four-level scale of previous traumatic experiences for the refugees used in this study is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

<b>Previous Traumatic Experiences</b>	
<b>Life-threatening</b>	Falling out of a building, close proximity to gunshots, hijacking
<b>Moderately life-threatening</b>	Witnessing demonstrations and riots, street fights, killings, burnings, political problems in country of origin, threat of kidnapping, accidents
<b>Not life-threatening</b>	Locked in a room, fear of kidnapping, feelings of lack of safety, family separation, crying, witnessing a ghost
<b>N/A</b>	"Don't know," no answer

One of the parental representatives provided an example of a non-life threatening experience when she stated that her child “saw a ghost of someone who was dead and woke up and had nightmares for a long time.” Four of the parental representatives provided examples of moderately life-threatening experiences such as “demonstrations, riots, people burning houses and tires, or witnessing killings.” One Haitian refugee parent representative stated that her child “used to face all kinds of situations back in Haiti. There was a lot violence in his neighborhood and street fights.” Three of the parental representatives provided examples of life-threatening experiences such as “being close to shooting weapons or police shootings.” No responses of Haitian parental representatives fell into the “N/A” fear theme category by failing to answer this question. The most common life-threatening previous traumatic experience for Haitians was close proximity to gunfire. The most common moderately life-threatening experiences for Haitians were witnessing demonstrations and burnings (see Appendix).

### *Identification of Primary Fear Object*

The researchers used eleven fear themes to code the eighteen refugee children’s responses to the interpretation of the tree fear object. All of the Haitian children responded with a fear object. The fear theme information for all of the refugees utilized in this study is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.

Fear Themes	
<b>Dark</b>	dark, being outside at night, being in the dark alone
<b>Lack of safety</b>	kidnapping, being chased, bad things, someone escaping from jail, someone hurting the child, getting hit by a car, falling, hiding, doing drugs, police
<b>Being Alone</b>	not near parents, alone without family, outside alone, staying alone
<b>Nature</b>	rain, thunder, moon, trees falling on child
<b>Animals</b>	snakes, dogs, crocodile, rats, turtle, lion, bear, tiger, rabbit, alligator
<b>Imaginary/Cultural Creatures</b>	ghosts, monster, zombies, zombie cats, evil spirits, dragon
<b>Scary Movies</b>	scary movies
<b>Verbal Arguments/ Disagreements</b>	parents shouting, lying
<b>Lack of Basic Needs</b>	hunger, homelessness, being tired
<b>Other (not able to categorize)</b>	bored, thinking, busy, something child was looking at
<b>N/A</b>	No answer, "I don't know"

The five Haitian children in this study all drew primary fear objects that exclusively resided within the animal fear theme and imaginary/cultural creatures fear theme (see Appendix). The majority of Haitian children drew fears with the animal fear theme and explained their fears as objects such as "a little dog, snakes, alligators, or frogs." Four out of five animal fear objects that Haitian children reported were reptiles and amphibians (snakes, alligators, or frogs). A minority of the Haitian children drew fears with the imaginary/cultural creatures fear theme and explained their fears as objects such as "monsters coming out of the sky or zombies."

### *Lamppost Fear Object Interpretation*

The researchers utilized eleven fear themes to code the refugee children's responses to the interpretation of the lamppost fear object as summarized in Table 2. The five Haitian children in the study interpreted fears within the darkness fear theme, nature fear theme, animals fear theme, and imaginary/cultural creatures fear theme. The fear theme that was interpreted by the Haitian children with the most frequency was the animal fear theme, and all the remaining fear themes were equally reported one time. All of the Haitian children who reported an animal fear theme object interpreted the lamppost fear object as a snake. One participant who was coded as interpreting an imaginary/cultural creature fear object stated, "There is a monster inside the building behind her. The monster looks like a window with big eyes, big teeth, big mouth, and a big nose." The participant who was coded as interpreting a nature fear theme interpreted the fear object as being "afraid of rain," and the participant who was coded as interpreting a dark fear theme interpreted the fear object as being "afraid of the dark."

### *Tree Fear Object Interpretation*

The researchers utilized eleven fear themes to code the refugee children's responses to the interpretation of the tree fear object as summarized in Table 2. The five Haitian children in the study interpreted fears that resided within the lack of safety fear theme, being alone fear theme, lack of basic needs fear theme, and imaginary/cultural creatures fear theme. The fear themes that were interpreted by the Haitian children with the most frequency were the lack of safety fear theme and the being alone fear theme, and the remaining fear themes were equally reported one time. One participant who was coded as interpreting a lack of safety and being alone fear objects stated, "She [the girl in the picture] saw people doing drugs, so she ran. Now she is lost."

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study suggest that the five Haitian children experienced prior traumatic experiences with the majority reporting moderately life-threatening experiences. The Haitian children's personal primary fear objects were exclusively composed of two of the eleven fear themes (animals and imaginary/cultural creatures), indicating that perhaps Haitian children's previous experiences have been highly subjected to these topical areas (Burnham, 2009).

In both the child's primary fear object and the child's interpretation of the lamppost fear object exercises, the most frequently reported fears were within the animal fear theme. In a study conducted by Burnham and colleagues (2008) on the fears of children after a hurricane natural disaster, results indicated that children reported fears associated with the repercussions of a hurricane frequently (i.e. looters, snakes, loose animals). The results from this study may indicate why children from a country experiencing many natural disasters, such as Haiti, report natural disaster aftermath related fears at a higher frequency than children who are not exposed to frequent natural disasters.

Furthermore, in both the child's primary fear object and the child's interpretation of the lamppost fear object exercises, the majority of the Haitian participants who identified an animal as the fear object reported reptiles or amphibians (e.g., snakes, alligators, or frogs). These results may reflect the theory developed by Burnham and Gullone (1997) that childhood fears can be culturally based due to the location and geographic characteristics of a country. The results from this study indicate that Haitian children may be more culturally prone to fearing amphibians, due to the fact that Haiti is an island with a high abundance of forest and aquatic terrain.

The imaginary/cultural creatures theme was the only fear theme represented in all three of the interview activities. The mystical interests of Haitian culture as well as the underlying religious beliefs of the Haitian people may explain the significance behind the imaginary/cultural creatures' multi-measure representation (Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002). Further research is necessary to understand the potential influences of Haitian mystical culture and the Voodoo religion on Haitian children's fears.

The results from the tree interpretation of fear object activity have specific interest to this study. The Haitian children reported fear themes that were more specifically related to life-threatening situations in the tree interpretation activity than in any other activity in the interview, with the exception of the imaginary/cultural creatures fear theme. Research has shown that activities that allow children to talk about fear through pictures enables them to discuss events that they would otherwise find difficulty in explaining (Driessnack, 2006). Further research is necessary to investigate how trees influence Haitian children to interpret fears in a more life-threatening way.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated how previous traumatic experiences, which frequently characterize refugee experiences, influence refugee children's primary fears and interpretation of fear. The results suggested that the majority of Haitian refugee parental representatives reported that their children had been subjected to moderately life-threatening and life-threatening experiences in Haiti. This finding suggests that Haitian children may be more susceptible than children not from Haiti to developing fears reflective of their most frequently experienced situations in Haiti. Haitian refugee children most frequently identified and interpreted animals and imaginary/cultural creatures as fears, neither of which can be defined as atypical of a developing child (Burnham, 2009). However, based on the results from this study, further research may indicate how amphibian creatures and Haitian cultural/spiritual influences play a role in Haitian children's fear development.

The study also suggests that Haitian refugees responded more reflectively when interpreting the fear of a child sitting underneath a tree. The results from this activity generated more traumatic and life-threatening responses for the Haitian refugees, with specific answers ranging from escaping drug-users and losing his or her family. This finding suggests that Haitian children's interpretation of fear may be influenced by their previous traumatic experiences.

There were several limitations to this study. The small sample size severely limited this study. Further research with an increased sample size may yield more results about how traumas associated with the refugee experience influence refugee children's fear and interpretation of fear. Another limitation was that the children's reported previous traumatic experiences in their native country were provided by the parents and not self-reported by the children themselves. The questionnaire utilized in this study was required to be read verbatim to the child, which could have limited further questions regarding the child's identification or interpretation of fear. The study aimed to draw connections between child refugee's experiences and how those experiences are reflected in the topical components of childhood fears. However, due to the descriptive nature of the study, no conclusions on the causal relationships between the selected variables were drawn.

APPENDIX

Figure 1.

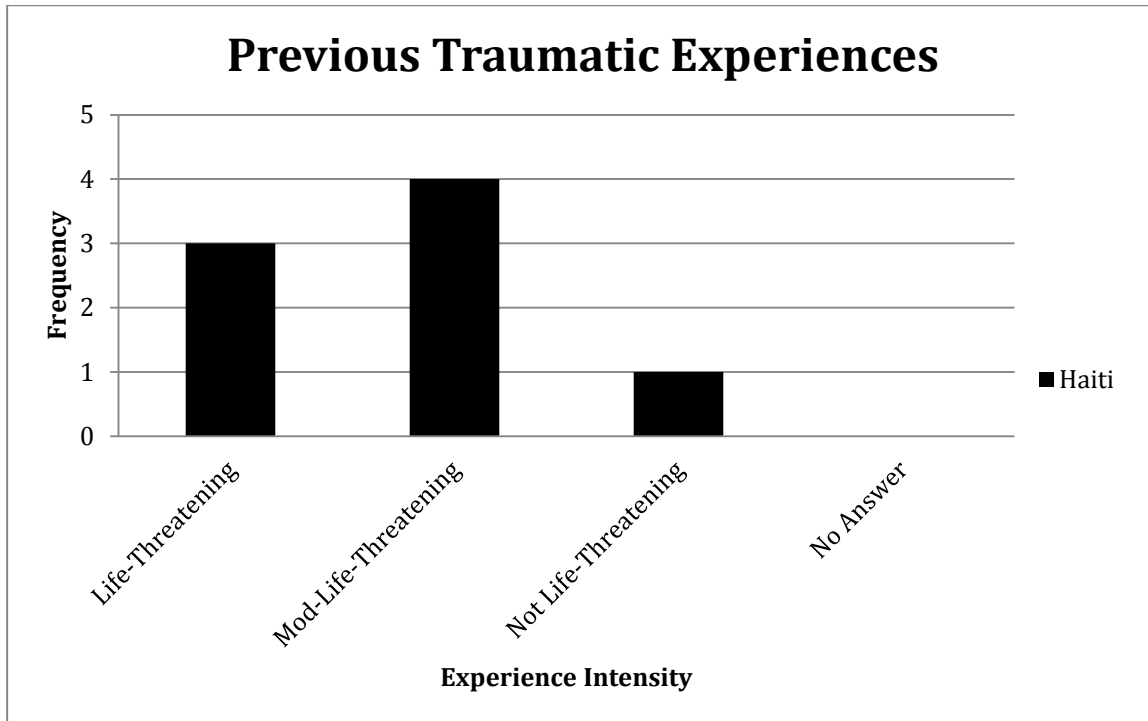
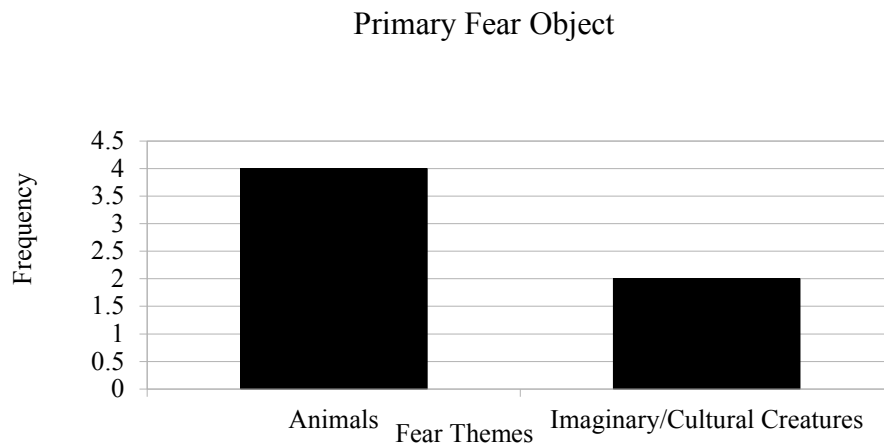
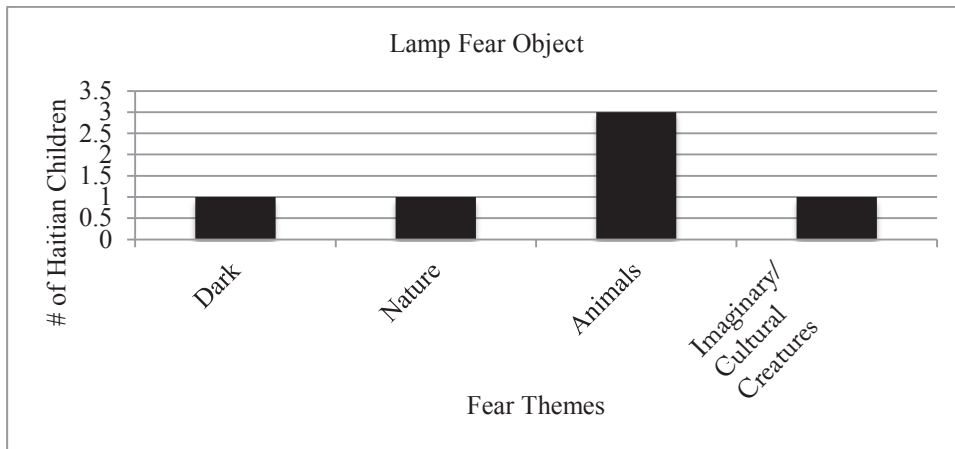


Figure 2.

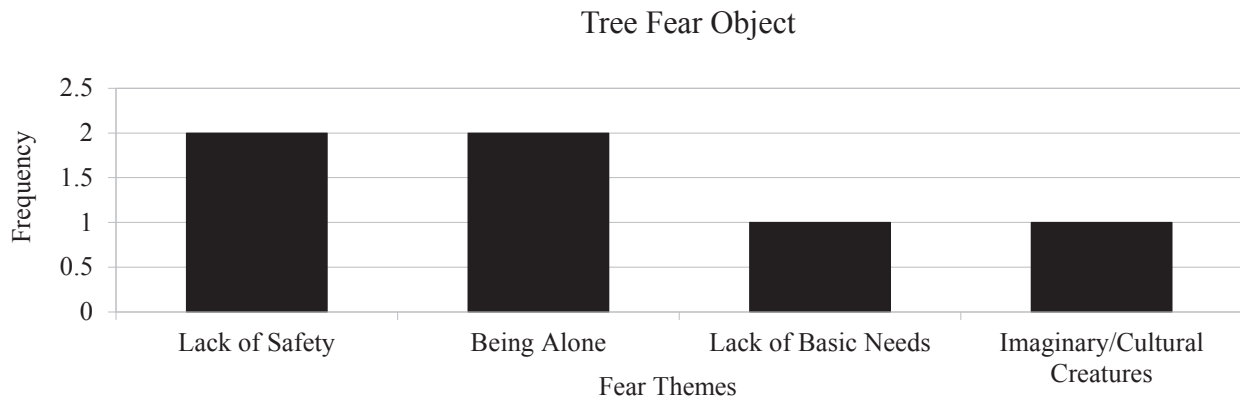




**Figure 3.**



**Figure 4.**



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