

Executive functioning in adverse environments: Using cognitive modeling to integrate deficit and adaptation frameworks

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Chapter I. General introduction

The field of adversity research is rapidly evolving. For decades, the predominant focus has been on how exposure to adversity impairs cognitive abilities. However, strength-based perspectives have been gaining ground on such traditional deficit perspectives. Strength-based perspectives highlight the skills, strategies, and knowledge that people may develop in response to adverse experiences. One area in particular that has seen an increase in strength-based thinking is research on executive functioning (EF), which refers to a set of abilities involved in planning, reasoning, and goal-directed behavior. At the same time, deficit perspectives remain influential, and for good reason: most studies also find that people with more exposure to adversity perform lower on EF tasks, even if some find support for improved abilities. Thus, understanding how adversity shapes EF requires knowing how deficits and strengths operate alongside each other within the same individual. In this dissertation, I will use methodological tools—grounded in mathematical and cognitive psychology—to develop this understanding.

In this Chapter, I will first provide an overview of the current state of the field of adversity research, with a special focus on EF. Next, I will discuss methodological issues that limit an integration of deficit and adaptation frameworks. Specifically, I will focus on issues with using standard performance measures as direct measures EF ability, and explain how cognitive modeling can provide a solution. Finally, I will present an overview of the aims of this dissertation, and the focus of subsequent chapters.

I.1 Current state of the field of adversity research

Exposure to adversity is associated with cognitive deficits

Decades of research have shown that people who experience more adversity—i.e., prolonged exposure to intense stress (for instance, due to violence, deprivation, unpredictability)—tend to score lower on standard cognitive tests (Hackman et al., 2010; Ursache & Noble, 2016a). This lower performance has been documented for a wide variety of cognitive abilities, ranging from executive functioning, social cognition, memory, and language, to intelligence (Farah et al., 2006; Sheridan et al., 2022; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014). Such findings have led to the proliferation of deficit models, which attribute lower performance in people from adversity to impairments in brain structure and function that undermine social and cognitive abilities (Algarin et al., 2017; Duncan et al., 2010; Farah et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2020; Nelson & Gabard-Durnam, 2020; Polavarapu & Hasbani, 2017; Rebello et al., 2018; Shonkoff et al., 2012; Ursache & Noble, 2016b). Insights derived from deficit models have informed policy and practice for decades, which have improved the lives of millions of people (Blair & Raver, 2014; Deming, 2009; Duncan et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011; Reynolds et al., 2019; Ursache & Noble, 2016a).

Exposure to adversity is associated with cognitive adaptations

In contrast to deficit frameworks, adaptation frameworks suggest that exposure to adversity could also be associated with intact or even enhanced cognitive abilities. Specifically,

people may develop cognitive abilities that help solve unique challenges posed by adverse environments (Ellis et al., 2017, 2022; Frankenhuys, Young, et al., 2020; Frankenhuys & Weerth, 2013). In adaptation frameworks, the term *enhanced* refers to an ability that has been improved by developmental adaptation, in a way that can be objectively measured (e.g., faster responses, higher accuracy; Frankenhuys, Young, et al., 2020). *Intact* abilities are abilities that are neither enhanced nor impaired by adversity. Cognitive adaptations could lead to intact rather than enhanced abilities, for instance, when performance is also negatively influenced by other deficits (Frankenhuys, Young, et al., 2020; Young et al., 2024).

An important assumption of adaptation frameworks is that specific types of adversity pose their own unique challenges to the individual, and hence require different adaptations (Ellis et al., 2022; Frankenhuys et al., 2016; Frankenhuys & Weerth, 2013). Therefore, testing adaptation hypotheses requires specificity; measures that combine different types of adversity—such as cumulative adversity scores—might not be associated with cognitive enhancements. Contemporary dimensional models of adversity posit that different adversities can be broadly clustered into threat (physical or psychosocial harm), material deprivation (low quantity and quality of material resources), and environmental unpredictability (stochastic variation in adversity, i.e., threat and deprivation, over space and time) (Ellis et al., 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2021; Salhi et al., 2021). Each of these dimensions captures a variety of specific exposures. For instance, exposure to threat may include living with an abusive parent, experiencing high levels of crime in one's neighborhood, or witnessing or participating in fights. Despite this variety, research shows that adversity exposures of the same dimension tend to have similar effects on social and cognitive development, and that their effects are (partially) distinct from effects of other dimensions (Sheridan et al., 2020).

Developmental adaptations in executive functioning

Adaptation frameworks have sparked a number of studies investigating the development of cognitive abilities in adverse environments (for a review, see Ellis et al., 2022). Several of these have focused on three core components of EF (Karr et al., 2018; Miyake et al., 2000; Zelazo et al., 2013): (1) attention shifting, i.e., efficiently switching between different tasks, (2) working memory updating, i.e., keeping track of changing information in working memory, and (3) inhibition, i.e., ignoring distractions. This line of research hypothesizes that attention shifting and working memory updating are particularly useful abilities in unpredictable and threatening environments. The rationale is that: (a) attention shifting facilitates detecting sudden threats and taking advantage of fleeting opportunities, and (b) working memory updating facilitates tracking changes in the environment. On the other hand, inhibition could actively interfere with detecting and tracking changes in one's environment (Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015; Young et al., 2018). Thus, adaptation perspectives predict enhanced performance on attention shifting and working memory updating tasks (in contrast to deficit frameworks), but predict lower performance on inhibition tasks (similar to deficit frameworks).

Several studies have obtained support for adaptation hypotheses, although results are sometimes mixed. Some studies found that exposure to unpredictability (Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015; Young et al., 2022) and violence (Young et al., 2022) are positively associated with attention shifting (for counter-examples, see Mezzacappa, 2004; Nweze et al., 2021; Rifkin-Graboi et al., 2021). Two studies found that exposure to unpredictability (Young et al., 2018) and violence (Young et al., 2022) are positively associated with working memory updating. Finally, exposure to different types of adversity, as well as lower socioeconomic status, have been found to be negatively associated with inhibition (Farah et al., 2006; Mezzacappa, 2004; Mittal et al., 2015; Noble et al., 2005; Rifkin-Graboi et al., 2021). Collectively, these results suggest that exposure to adversity does not uniformly negatively affect EF abilities, but that associations differ for specific EF abilities.

Integrating deficit and adaptation frameworks

Deficit and adaptation frameworks are generally considered complementary; within the same person, exposure to adversity could impair some abilities, while enhancing others (Frankenhuis, Young, et al., 2020). However, their integration is still limited. For instance, it is largely unclear which specific abilities may be impaired and which ones may be enhanced by specific types of adversity, and how deficit and adaptation processes may operate alongside each other within the same person. In addition, disentangling deficit and adaptation processes can often be challenging. For example, adaptations in specific abilities may co-occur with general disruptions in brain architecture and neural efficiency due to chronic stress (Shonkoff et al., 2012). As I will argue in the next section, one major methodological challenge limiting a further integration is that both frameworks tend to infer differences in cognitive abilities based on raw performance scores, such as average response times and error rates.

1.2 Different reasons for lower performance on EF tasks

Performance on EF tasks is often used as a direct proxy for EF ability, but differences in performance do not necessarily reflect differences in ability. The reason why becomes clear when looking at their dictionary definitions. Performance is defined as the execution of an action (Merriam-Webster, 2024b). In the context of EF tasks, performance may refer to the speed or accuracy of a person's responses to the task. Ability is defined as the natural aptitude for, or acquired proficiency in doing something (Merriam-Webster, 2024a). In the context of EF tasks, this concerns the aptitude for, or acquired proficiency in solving the challenge posed by the task. For performance to equal ability, it is important that the ability is the only factor (or at least the most substantial factor) determining the execution actions on EF tasks.

However, research in cognitive psychology shows that performance on EF tasks, is influenced by cognitive processes other than the specific EF ability that is often of primary interest. Examples of these other processes—discussed in more detail below—are a person's level of response caution, speed of response execution, and general processing speed.

This means that two people with the same EF ability level could differ in their performance if, for instance, one of them responds more cautiously than the other (i.e., prioritizing accuracy over speed). These emerging findings, and their implications, have so far mostly been overlooked in adversity research. Given this, long-held assumptions about how adversity affects executive functions could be oversimplified or even misguided.

A brief case-study

To illustrate the limitations of raw performance scores, imagine a child from a disadvantaged background, let's call her Yara, who is struggling in school. Yara is selected by a screening program designed to proactively identify children who need additional support. The screening includes a brief battery of EF tasks. The results reveal that Yara's response times are below average on nearly all tasks, with particularly low scores on tasks assessing inhibition and working memory. The screening program concludes that Yara has deficits in multiple cognitive abilities. To help her thrive in school, it is recommended that she receive targeted interventions aimed at strengthening her EF, particularly focusing on inhibition and working memory. These interventions might involve cognitive training exercises, tutoring, or behavioral strategies to help her focus and better manage her impulses.

Are these recommendations justified? Perhaps, but, as I will show in the following sections, there are alternative explanations for Yara's lower performance that should be considered. First, Yara may be slower not because of lower EF ability, but because she uses a different strategy than other children, which could affect her performance. For instance, her responses may be more cautious, sacrificing speed to achieve a higher level of accuracy. Second, lower performance across tasks could be driven by a single process common to all tasks, rather than reflecting deficits in specific cognitive abilities. Both issues can give rise to a performance-ability gap, meaning that Yara's raw performance on EF tasks might not accurately reflect her true EF abilities. In the next sections, I will outline the issues with raw performance scores as proxies of cognitive ability, and explain how adversity research can address these issues by building bridges with mathematical and cognitive psychology.

Limitations of raw performance scores

Research often relies on raw performance scores as a proxy for cognitive abilities. Most often these are response times (i.e., the total time taken to complete a task) and accuracy (i.e., whether the decision made is correct or incorrect). Although there are exceptions, researchers generally focus on one over the other, and these practices can differ between tasks. For instance, performance on inhibition tasks tends to be summarized using the average response time, while performance on working memory updating tasks tends to be summarized using the overall error rate (Bastian et al., 2020). For simplicity, I will mostly focus on response times in this section. However, the same arguments generally also apply to accuracy.

The use of response times is based on the assumption that cognitive operations involve multiple distinct processes, each of which takes time to complete (Donders, 1869).

When any of the processes in the chain takes longer to complete, this results in an increased response time. This is also the basic rationale behind commonly used difference scores, where the mean response time of one condition is subtracted from the mean response time of another condition (Donders, 1969). For instance, many EF tasks include a condition with lower processing demands (e.g., trials on the Stroop Task where the color matches the printed word) and a condition requiring the same processing demands *plus* an additional processing demand (e.g., trials on the Stroop trials where the color does not match the printed word). As the conditions are assumed to differ only in terms of the added processing demand, a difference score is thought to isolate the speed of that specific process.

The problem with these approaches is that the use of response times is not based on a formally defined model of how the cognitive system works. Response times are assumed to reflect several cognitive processes, but these processes are treated largely as a black box. This leads to a reverse-inference problem when using response times to infer cognitive ability: just because a lower ability leads to slower response times, does not mean that slower response times reflect lower ability (White & Kitchen, 2022). Common approaches to account for other processes, such as difference scores, have been shown to be insufficient (Miller & Ulrich, 2013). For instance, analyses based on response times fail to account for speed-accuracy trade offs: Some people may take longer to complete a task because they prioritize accuracy over speed, not because they process information more slowly (Bogacz et al., 2010; Van Veen et al., 2008). If adversity exposure is associated with changes in these other processes, the resulting difference in performance could be misattributed to their cognitive abilities.

I.3 From performance to cognitive processes: Computational models of cognition

Cognitive modeling offers a fruitful way to bridge the gap between raw performance scores and EF ability (Guest & Martin, 2021; Patzelt et al., 2018). Cognitive models are formalized, mathematical accounts of cognitive processes. They make explicit assumptions about the (unobserved) cognitive processes that give rise to differences in raw performance, and formalize these assumptions in mathematical language. The result is one or more model *parameters* that represent distinct cognitive processes. By applying a cognitive model to empirical performance data, we can generate parameter estimates that best explain key patterns in the data. These parameter estimates can then be used as measures of cognitive processes, and subsequently as predictors or outcomes of interest.

Figure 1.1 shows how a workflow based on cognitive modeling differs from one based on analyzing raw performance. Performance-based workflows infer cognitive abilities either directly from raw performance scores (e.g., mean response time), or by calculating the difference in performance between an experimental and a control condition. Thus, these approaches assume that response times directly reflect the ability of interest. In contrast,

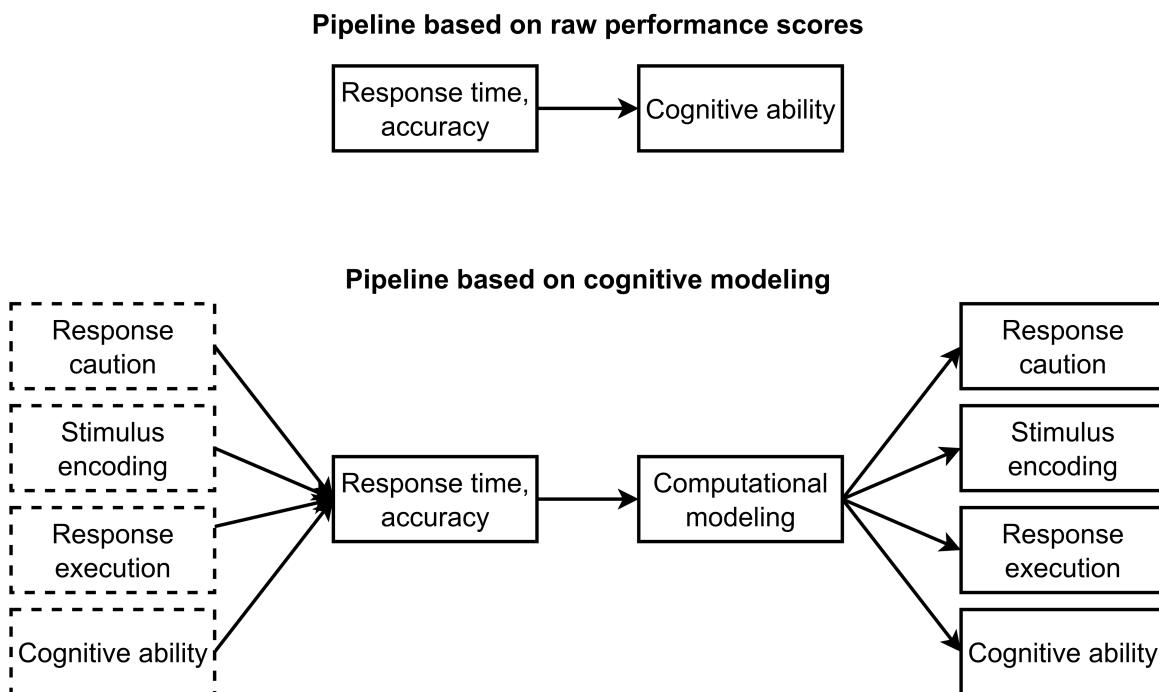


Figure 1.1. Workflow based on raw performance (top) versus workflow based on cognitive modeling (bottom).

a cognitive modeling workflow provides an explicit mathematical account of how performance is shaped by a collection of cognitive processes. Adversity research can use cognitive models to obtain direct measures of the cognitive processes involved in EF tasks, and to investigate if and how they are associated with adversity exposure.

Cognitive models of decision-making

Most common EF tasks require some kind of binary decision-making. Some examples include deciding whether an arrow points left or right, classifying a geometric shape either in terms of its color or shape, or deciding whether the currently presented letter is the same as the one presented earlier. These decisions usually have to be made under time pressure, meaning that people have to balance being fast with being accurate. Cognitive models of decision making explain how people make these kinds of decisions, and how they balance demands on speed and accuracy. In cognitive psychology, these models have proven their usefulness for explaining performance on EF tasks relative to raw performance measures (Frischkorn et al., 2019; Hedge et al., 2021; Löffler et al., 2024). For adversity research, they could similarly prove useful in better understanding why people with more exposure to adversity sometimes perform lower, and sometimes perform higher.

Drift Diffusion Model

One of the most well-validated and successful models of decision-making is the Drift Diffusion Model (DDM; Forstmann et al., 2016; Ratcliff & McKoon, 2008; Ratcliff & Rouder, 1998; Wagenmakers, 2009). The DDM accounts for the cognitive processes that give rise

to patterns of RTs and error rates (Ratcliff et al., 2015). It models decision-making as an evidence accumulation process, in which people repeatedly sample information until they have sufficient information to favor one response option over the other (see Figure 1.2). Evidence accumulation is modeled as a random walk process, which drifts towards one of two decision boundaries, usually corresponding to the correct or incorrect response¹. When the evidence accumulation process reaches one of the two decision boundaries, the response is initiated. The DDM also accounts for the time that it takes to encode stimulus information before evidence accumulation starts, and the time that it takes to execute a response after a decision has been made.

Applying the DDM to trial-level RT and accuracy data yields three parameters² that represent distinct cognitive processes. These are (1) the *drift rate*, (2) the *boundary separation*, and (3) the *non-decision time*. Figure 1.3 shows how changes in each DDM parameter shape performance using simulated data. Compared to a baseline for a hypothetical participant, the Figure shows how changes in isolated DDM parameters affect specific aspects of response time distributions.

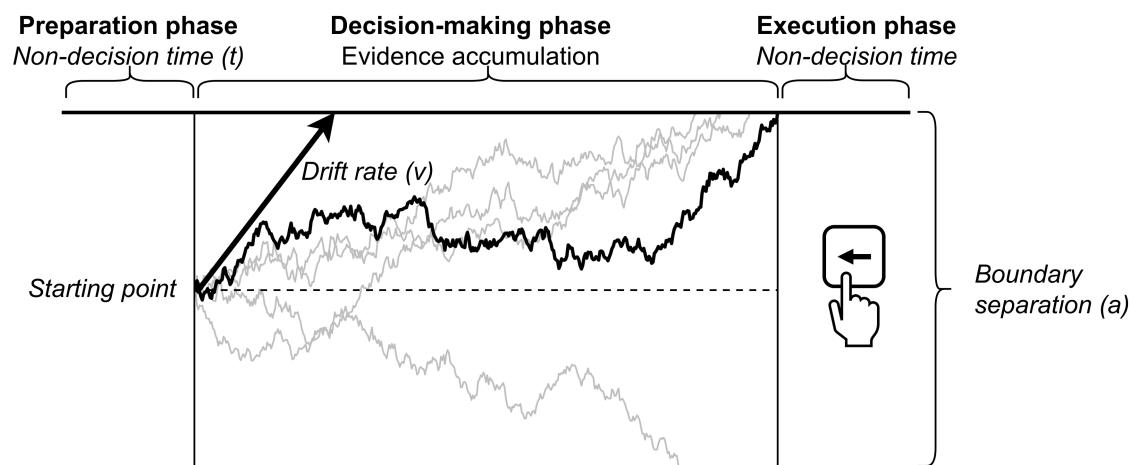


Figure 1.2. An overview of the Drift Diffusion Model (DDM). The DDM assumes that people sequentially move through three distinct stages when performing tests with two forced-response options. First, in a preparation phase, people visually encode stimuli (e.g., this may take longer if a stimulus is visually complex). Second, in the decision phase, people accumulate information favoring one decision over the other (e.g., whether to press the left vs. right key). Each jagged line represents this accumulation on a single trial. Third, in the execution phase, people execute a motor response (e.g., pressing the left vs. right key). The DDM estimates four parameters that represent four distinct cognitive processes (italicized): (1) *Drift rate*: the average rate of evidence accumulation towards the correct decision boundary; i.e., **efficiency of evidence accumulation**; (2) *Non-decision time*: the time spent on processes outside of the decision phase, i.e., **encoding stimuli and executing response**; (3) *Boundary separation*: the distance between decision boundaries; i.e., **response caution**; (4) *Starting point*: the starting point of the decision process; i.e., **response bias**. Figure copied from Vermeent et al. (2024).

The *drift rate* is the average rate across trials with which evidence accumulation reaches the correct boundary, and measures the efficiency of evidence accumulation. A decrease in drift rates affects performance in two ways (see Figure 1.3B). First, a lower drift rate increases the spread in the tail of the distribution, coupled with only a small change in the peak of the distribution. Second, it leads to an increased error rate. Thus, people with a lower drift rate respond more slowly and commit more errors. Individual differences in drift rates are generally considered as reflecting differences in cognitive ability (Löffler et al., 2024; Schmiedek et al., 2007; Voss et al., 2013). However, as discussed in section 1.4, drift rates also capture general processes (Lerche et al., 2020; Löffler et al., 2024; Weigard et al., 2021).

The *boundary separation* is the width between the two decision boundaries, and measures the level of response caution. An increase in boundary separation affects performance in two ways (see Figure 1.3C). First, a larger boundary separation shifts the peak of the distribution to the right, and also increases the spread of the distribution. Second, it leads to a reduced error rate. Thus, the boundary separation captures a person's speed-accuracy trade off: a larger boundary separation leads to more accurate yet slower responses.

The *non-decision time* is a combination of the speed of initial stimulus encoding and the speed of response execution. A larger non-decision time shifts the distribution to the right without changing the spread of the distribution and without changing the error rate (see Figure 1.3D). Thus, people with a larger non-decision time are slower without a change in accuracy.

In this dissertation, I focus on the DDM for three reasons. First, previous work shows that the DDM is remarkably flexible. While it was originally developed for simple and fast perceptual and recall tasks, recent work has applied it to a wide range of more complex tasks with longer response windows, such as intelligence and EF tasks (Lerche et al., 2020; Löffler et al., 2024). Second, many established EF tasks have a binary response format and therefore adhere to the key assumptions of the model. Third, the DDM is among the most well-established models in its class, with many recent advances in software and computational approaches that make it increasingly accessible for researchers from fields other than mathematical and cognitive psychology (e.g., D. J. Johnson et al., 2017; Vandekerckhove et al., 2011; Voss et al., 2013, 2015; Wiecki et al., 2013; for some DDM applications in developmental and clinical contexts, see Grange & Rydon-Grange, 2022; Thompson & Steinbeis, 2021).

1.4 Specific abilities and general processes

In the context of EF tasks, drift rates can capture specific executive functioning abilities (Löffler et al., 2024). The reason is that a higher EF ability should lead to faster and more accurate responses. For instance, on inhibition tasks like the Flanker task, a person with a

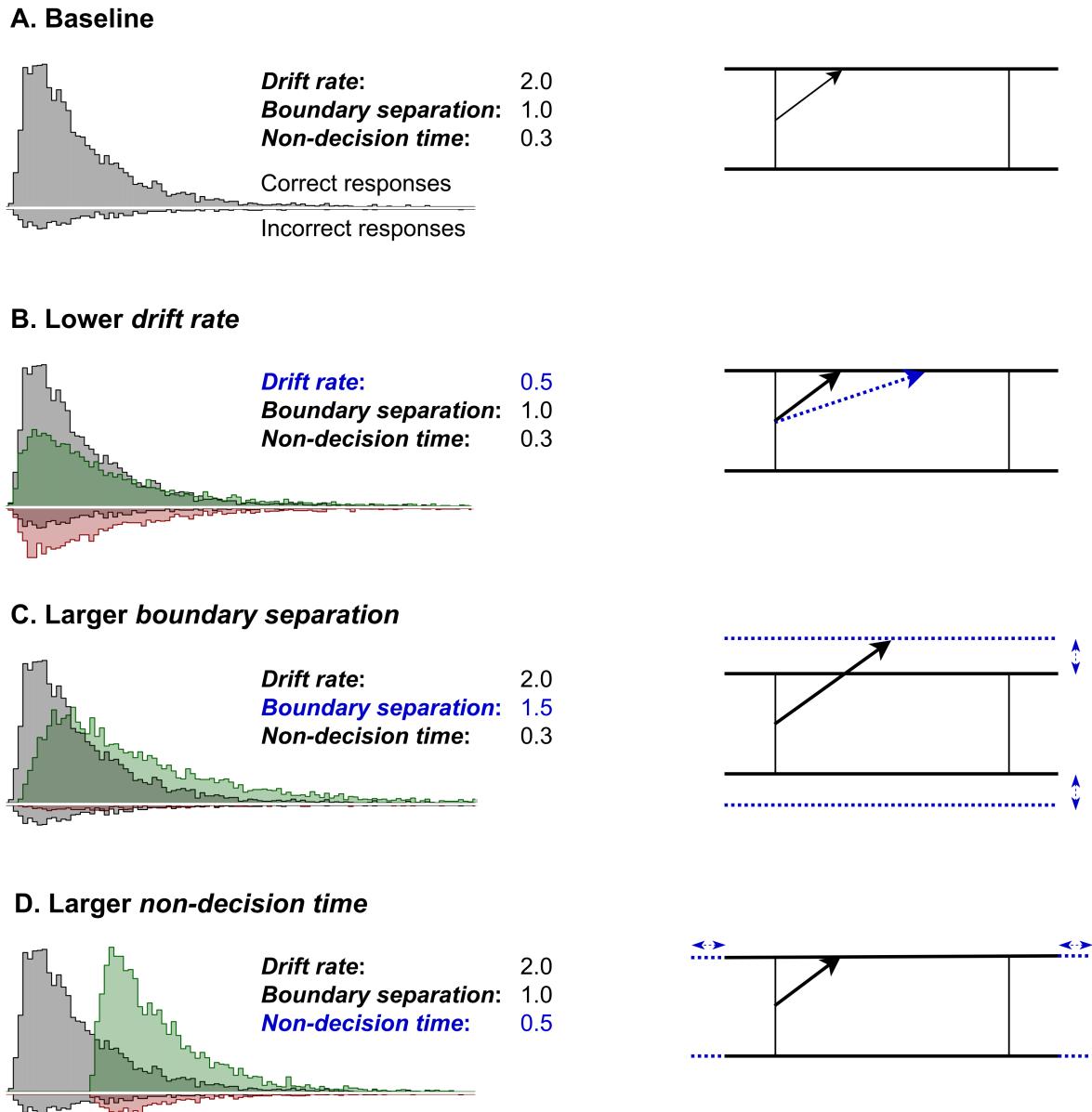


Figure 1.3. Simulated effects of changes in Drift Diffusion parameters on response time distributions. Each simulation represents a single person completing 5,000 trials. The upward histograms depict response times of correct responses, and the downward histograms depict response times of incorrect responses. Histograms in grey depict the baseline dataset, and histograms in green/red depict datasets with changes in specific Drift Diffusion parameters. The images on the right graphically depict the change in the corresponding parameter value (in blue). Panel A: Depicts the baseline model, with response times and error rates simulated based on a drift rate of 2.0, a boundary separation of 1.0, and a non-decision time of 0.3. Panel B: A lower drift rate increases the spread in the tail of the distribution but barely changes the leading edge of the distribution, while increasing error rates. Panel C: A larger boundary separation increases the spread of the distribution and shifts the leading edge to the right, while decreasing error rates. Panel D: A longer non-decision time shifts the distribution to the right without changing the spread of the distribution and without changing the error rate.

higher ability to ignore distractions would be faster at narrowing down attention to goal-

relevant information, and would be less likely to accidentally act on distractions. As can be seen in Figure 1.3B, these are the exact response patterns that are associated with an increased drift rate.

However, recent research shows that in addition to specific EF abilities, drift rates on EF tasks also reflect task-general processing speed (Hedge et al., 2022; Lerche et al., 2020; Löffler et al., 2024; Weigard et al., 2021). While EF abilities are specific to particular tasks, task-general processing speed affects performance across EF tasks. Therefore, the relative contributions of task-general processing speed and specific EF abilities to drift rates can be teased apart using structural equation modeling. Specifically, task-general processing speed can be captured by a task-general latent factor loading on drift rates of all tasks, and specific EF abilities can be captured using task- or ability-specific latent factors of drift rates. After accounting for task-general processing speed, remaining variance should be a more precise measure of specific EF abilities.

Research applying structural equation modeling to drift rates on EF tasks shows that drift rates consistently form a task-general factor that accounts for a substantial part of the variance (Frischkorn et al., 2019; Hedge et al., 2022; Löffler et al., 2024; Weigard & Sripada, 2021). In fact, several studies did not find any meaningful variance associated with specific EF abilities after accounting for task-general processing speed (Frischkorn et al., 2019; Hedge et al., 2022; Löffler et al., 2024), although one study found a correlation between task-general drift rate and self-reported self control, which is related to EF (Weigard et al., 2021). Thus, it remains an open question to what extent traditional EF tasks are suitable measures of specific EF abilities, even when using cognitive modeling.

The influence of task-general processing speed on EF task performance is another potential source of bias in adversity research. If adversity is negatively associated with lower task-general processing speed, this could make it seem as if several different EF abilities are impaired, rather than one general process. This has important implications not just for basic science, but also for interventions. Specifically, if adversity is associated with general rather than specific processes, then interventions targeting specific abilities (e.g., training performance on inhibition tasks) may not be effective.

1.5 Open questions for adversity research

The integration of deficit and adaptation frameworks is hindered by relying on the use of raw performance scores (see section 1.2). In particular, the idea that performance on EF tasks is influenced by multiple processes has two important implications for adversity research. First, both deficits and adaptations could affect different processes on the same EF task. That is, raw performance on a single task could be lowered by a deficit in one process, while also being enhanced by an adaptation in another process. Second, slower task-general processes, such as basic processing speed, could make it seem as though adversity exposure lowers many different abilities, rather than a single general process. Such task-

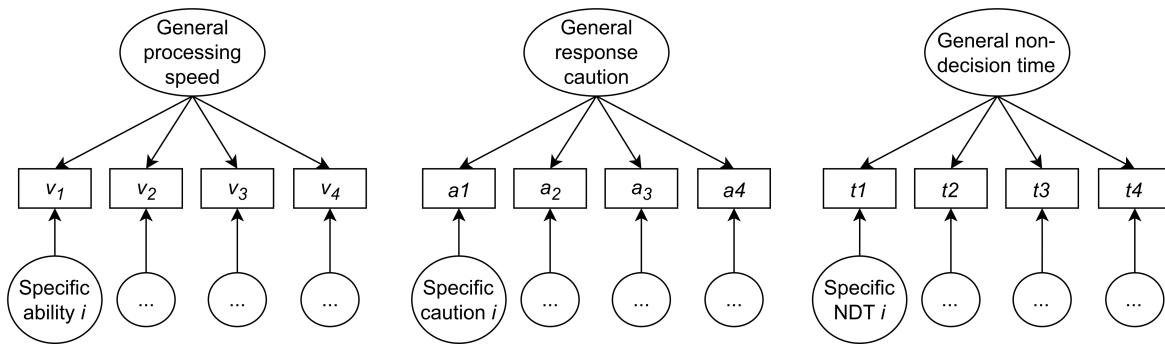


Figure 1.4. Task-specific and task-general aspects of performance on EF tasks. Rectangles represent Drift Diffusion parameter estimates on (hypothetical) individual tasks. The ellipses at the top depict general factors that account for shared variance across tasks. The ellipses at the bottom depict task-specific factors that capture residual variances, i.e., the proportion of variance in Drift Diffusion parameters unique to a particular task after partialling out task-general variance. v = Drift rate, a = Boundary separation, t = Non-decision time.

general effects could also overshadow adaptations in specific abilities, making it difficult to discover unique strengths (Bignardi et al., 2024; Young et al., 2024). Both limitations stand in the way of a full integration of deficit and adaptation frameworks, and common practices based on raw performance scores fall short on both counts.

Revisiting Yara's case, a cognitive modeling analysis of her performance might reveal that her slower responses result from anxiety about performing the tasks, prompting her to be cautious in order to avoid making mistakes. In addition, her tendency to be slower across tasks may be caused by slower general processing speed. After accounting for these factors, we may discover that Yara's difficulties with inhibition and working memory specifically are smaller than initially thought. We may even find that she has enhanced or intact abilities that remained hidden before. This would have important consequences for the nature of interventions. Instead of cognitive training exercises and behavioral strategies focused on improving specific abilities, interventions could instead focus on finding and alleviating the source of her task anxiety, and allowing her to work on tasks at her own pace. Thus, solving these methodological challenges has important implications not just for basic science, but also for interventions.

1.6 Current aims

This dissertation has three central aims. The first aim is to uncover the cognitive processes underlying performance differences (both lowered and enhanced) in people exposed to adversity. Using a combination of DDM and structural equation modeling, I will show that researchers likely overestimate deficits in specific cognitive abilities when analyzing raw performance alone. The second aim is to investigate to what extent performance differ-

ences on EF tasks can be attributed to ability-specific processes as opposed to more general processes or strategies. The third aim is to show how moving beyond raw performance towards cognitive processes can enrich the next generation of adversity research.

1.7 Dissertation outline

The chapters in this dissertation can be read in any order. The empirical chapters (Chapters 2-5) are based on articles that have either been published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, or are currently under review. In **Chapter 2**, I analyze the associations of two forms of adversity—material deprivation and household threat—with inhibition ability, attention shifting ability, mental rotation ability, and general processing speed, among a representative sample of children from the United States. Specifically, I use DDM and structural equation modeling to investigate which cognitive processes are associated with adversity in 9-10 year-olds, and whether these associations are more task-general or task-specific. In **Chapter 3**, I analyze the associations of two forms of adversity—exposure to material deprivation and threat—with inhibition ability, attention shifting, and general processing speed, among a representative sample of adults from the Netherlands. As in Chapter 2, I use DDM and structural equation modeling, but this time including two inhibition tasks, three attention shifting tasks, and a basic processing speed task, in order to estimate more precise latent ability factors. In **Chapter 4**, I analyze the associations of two forms of adversity—exposure to violence and unpredictability—with inhibition ability, among young adults from the United States. Across three studies, I use the Shrinking Spotlight Model—a special version of the DDM—which captures attention processes related to inhibition. In **Chapter 5**, I analyze the associations of three forms of adversity—exposure to neighborhood threat, material deprivation, and unpredictability—with working memory ability, among a representative sample of adolescents and adults from the Netherlands. Specifically, I use structural equation modeling to distinguish between working memory capacity and working memory updating. In **Chapter 6**, I discuss the insights generated in Chapters 2-5, and develop a roadmap for future adversity research in the context of two developments in the field: integrating deficit and adaptation frameworks, and developing more ecologically and contextually relevant measurement instruments of EF.

1.8 Open science statement

For all empirical chapters (Chapters 2-5), I preregistered the hypotheses, design, and analyses prior to collecting the data and/or conducting the analyses. All deviations from preregistrations are described in the main text. The studies reported in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5 were Registered Reports. In a Registered Report, the Introduction and Methods sections are submitted to and peer-reviewed by the journal prior to data collection and/or analyzing the data (Chambers & Tzavella, 2021). The Registered Report described in Chapter 5 was peer-reviewed through *Peer Community In Registered Reports*, a non-commercial initiative that offers peer review of preprints outside of traditional journals (see <https://rr.peercommunityin.org/PCIRegisteredReports>).

For each empirical chapter, the analysis code, study materials, (synthetic) data, and reproducible manuscript are openly available on my personal GitHub page (<https://github.com/stefanvermeent>). Each chapter provides links to the respective GitHub repositories, which were turned into user-friendly website versions. Full project histories with timestamped milestones were generated using the *projectlog* R package (Vermeent, 2023), which I developed in an attempt to optimize my Open Science workflow. Chapter 2 is based on data from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study (<https://abcdstudy.org>), and for that reason cannot be shared openly on the Github Repository. The same is true for Chapter 4 and 5, which are based on a combination of previously collected and newly collected data in the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel study (<https://lissdata.org>). Researchers with an academic affiliation can apply for access to both data sets.

Chapter 2. Cognitive deficits and enhancements in youth from adverse conditions: An integrative assessment using Drift Diffusion Modeling in the ABCD study

This chapter is based on

Vermeent, S., Young, E.S., DeJoseph, M.L., Schubert, A.-L., & Frankenhuys, W.E. (2024). Cognitive deficits and enhancements in youth from adverse conditions: An integrative assessment using Drift Diffusion Modeling in the ABCD study. *Developmental Science*, 27(4), e13478. <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.13478>

2.0 Abstract

Childhood adversity can lead to cognitive deficits or enhancements, depending on many factors. Though progress has been made, two challenges prevent us from integrating and better understanding these patterns. First, studies commonly use and interpret raw performance differences, such as response times, which conflate different stages of cognitive processing. Second, most studies either isolate or aggregate abilities, obscuring the degree to which individual differences reflect task-general (shared) or task-specific (unique) processes. We addressed these challenges using Drift Diffusion Modeling (DDM) and structural equation modeling (SEM). Leveraging a large, representative sample of 9-10 year-olds from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study, we examined how two forms of adversity—material deprivation and household threat—were associated with performance on tasks measuring processing speed, inhibition, attention shifting, and mental rotation. Using DDM, we decomposed performance on each task into three distinct stages of processing: speed of information uptake, response caution, and stimulus encoding/response execution. Using SEM, we isolated task-general and task-specific variances in each processing stage and estimated their associations with the two forms of adversity. Youth with more exposure to household threat (but not material deprivation) showed slower task-general processing speed, but showed intact task-specific abilities. In addition, youth with more exposure to household threat tended to respond more cautiously in general. These findings suggest that traditional assessments might overestimate the extent to which childhood adversity reduces specific abilities. By combining DDM and SEM approaches, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of how adversity affects different aspects of youth's cognitive performance.

Author contributions

All authors were involved in conceptualizing the study. SV accessed and analyzed the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors provided feedback on the manuscript.

2.1 Introduction

The effects of early-life adversity—such as growing up in poverty or experiencing high levels of violence—on cognition are complex. There is a growing consensus that adversity-exposed youth may develop not only deficits, but also strengths. For example, studies find lowered and improved performance across different cognitive domains including (but not limited to) executive functioning, social cognition, language, and emotion (Ellis et al., 2022; Frankenhuys et al., 2016; Frankenhuys & Weerth, 2013; Sheridan et al., 2022; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014). Researchers focused on one type of effect or another acknowledge the importance of identifying both deficits and strengths. Yet, in practice, they often focus on one at the expense of the other. To develop an integrated, well-rounded, and nuanced understanding of how adversity shapes cognitive abilities, research must integrate both types of effects.

Such an integration of deficit- and strength-based approaches is hampered by two methodological challenges. First, most cognitive tasks involve different stages of processing which are obscured when analyzing raw performance differences. This makes it difficult to understand why cognitive performance may be lowered or improved. Second, adversity may lower or improve performance because it affects general processes (i.e., processes shared across many tasks) or abilities that are task-specific. In this Registered Report, we use a framework that tackles both challenges. First, we decompose raw performance into measures of different stages of cognitive processes through cognitive modeling. Second, we analyze four different tasks—tapping processing speed, attention shifting, inhibition, and mental rotation—all of which have documented associations with adversity. Finally, we model shared (i.e., task-general) and unique (i.e., task-specific) factors that drive performance and investigate how they are associated with adversity.

What do deficit and enhancement patterns mean?

Both the deficit and strength-based literature often use speeded tasks, in which participants are usually instructed to respond as fast and accurate as possible. For example, performing well on inhibition tasks (e.g., Flanker task, Go/No-Go Task; Farah et al., 2006; Fields et al., 2021; Mezzacappa, 2004; Noble et al., 2005), attention shifting tasks (e.g., Dimensional Change Card Sort; Farah et al., 2006; Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015; Noble et al., 2005; Nweze et al., 2021; Young et al., 2022), and stimulus detection tasks (Farah et al., 2006; Noble et al., 2005; Pollak, 2008) requires fast and accurate responses. In practice, performance is often quantified using aggregated indices of speed alone (e.g., RT), accuracy alone (e.g., proportion correct), or both independently (rather than in an integrated manner).

In both the deficit and strength-based literature, *task performance* (indexed by mean RTs or accuracy) is routinely equated with *cognitive ability*. For example, deficit-focused studies relate slower RTs on inhibition tasks to *worse inhibition ability* (Farah et al., 2006; Fields et al., 2021; Mezzacappa, 2004; Noble et al., 2005). Strength-based studies relate

faster RTs on standard attention shifting tasks to *better shifting ability* (Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015; Young et al., 2022). However, speed and accuracy comprise more than pure ability (e.g., inhibition, attention shifting). They also measure other constructs such as response caution (e.g., more or less cautious responding), speed of task preparation (e.g., orienting attention, encoding information), and speed of response execution. This heterogeneity creates an inferential risk, namely, if performance differences are interpreted as differences in abilities without sufficiently considering alternative explanations. In addition, the effect of adversity exposure may not be limited to a single process. For example, a specific type of adversity could affect both the speed of information processing and also shape the strategy that a person uses. These inferential challenges have real-world implications, especially when raw performance is used as an early screening tool to assess cognitive abilities (Distefano et al., 2021).

One promising solution to these issues is leveraging cognitive measurement models developed by mathematical psychologists. For speeded binary decision tasks, a well-established measurement model is the Drift Diffusion Model (DDM; Forstmann et al., 2016; Ratcliff & McKoon, 2008; Ratcliff & Rouder, 1998; Wagenmakers, 2009). The DDM integrates speed and accuracy on a trial-by-trial level to estimate cognitive processes at different stages of the decision-making process. The DDM assumes that people go through three distinct phases on each trial (see Figure 2.1 for a visualization). The first phase, *preparation*, includes processes such as focusing attention and visually encoding the stimulus. In the second phase, *decision-making*, people gather evidence for both response options until the evidence sufficiently favors one option over the other (explained below) and the decision process terminates. The third phase, *execution*, involves preparing and executing the motor response corresponding to the choice.

DDM estimates a set of parameters³ for each participant that represent each phase of the decision process (Voss et al., 2004). The *drift rate* (v) represents the speed of information uptake (Schmiedek et al., 2007; Voss et al., 2013). People with a higher drift rate are faster and make fewer errors. The *non-decision time* (t_0) includes initial preparatory processes (e.g., visually encoding the stimulus) and processes after the decision is made (e.g., pressing a button). All else being equal, longer non-decision times reflect slower information processing but without a cost nor benefit in accuracy. The *boundary separation* (a) represents the distance between the two decision boundaries. A larger boundary separation means more information is collected before making a decision. Thus, boundary separation measures response caution. In contrast to non-decision time, larger boundary separation leads to slower but more accurate responses, reflecting a speed-accuracy trade-off.

As mentioned earlier, adversity-related raw performance differences—both lowered and improved performance—are typically interpreted as differences in ability (e.g., inhibition, attention shifting). If these interpretations are accurate, then drift rate would re-

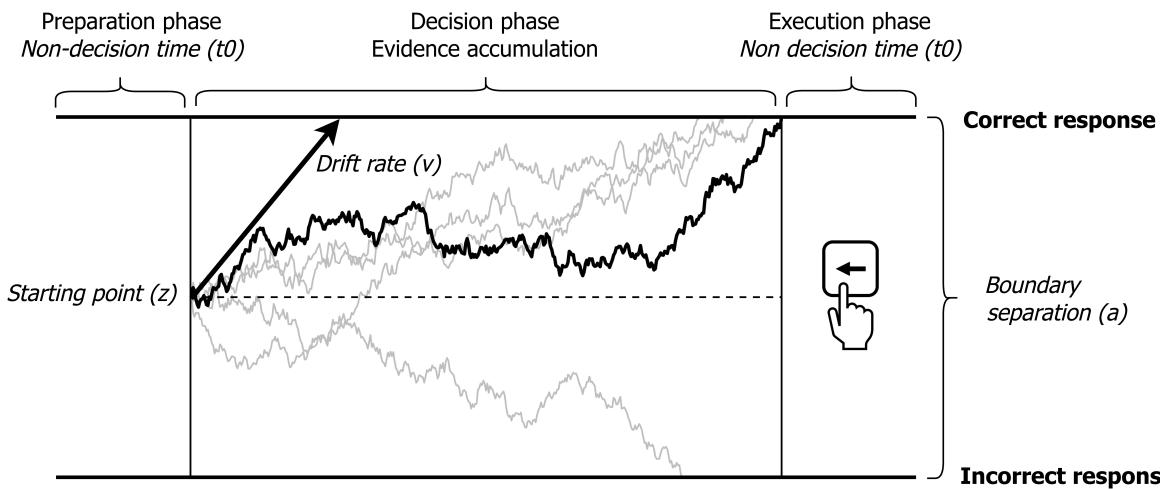


Figure 2.1. A visual overview of the Drift Diffusion Model (DDM). The DDM assumes that decision making on cognitive tasks with two forced response options advances through three stages. First, people go through a preparation phase in which they engage in initial stimulus encoding. Second, people gather information for one of two response options until the accumulation process terminates at one of the decision boundaries. Each squiggly line represents the evidence accumulation process on a single trial. Third, a motor response is triggered in the execution phase. The model estimates four parameters that reflect distinct cognitive processes (printed in italic): (1) The *drift rate* represents the rate at which evidence accumulation drifts towards the decision boundary and is a measure of processing speed; (2) The *non-decision time* represents the combined time spent on task preparation and response execution; (3) The *boundary separation* represents the width of the decision boundaries and is a measure of response caution; (4) The *starting point* represents the starting point of the decision process and can be used to model response biases (not considered in this study).

flect these variations. That is because improved ability would result in both decreased RTs and increased accuracy. However, if performance differences arise through other factors—such as differences in response caution or response speed—they would be captured by parameters other than the drift rate. Thus, disentangling the drift rate, non-decision time, and boundary separation enhances our understanding of how adversity-exposure is associated with performance.

Are deficit and enhancement patterns task-specific or task-general?

An important caveat to interpreting task performance on any task in isolation is that performance on most tasks relies both on shared cognitive processes and unique abilities. For example, RTs on executive functioning tasks are substantially confounded with general processing efficiency (Frischkorn et al., 2019; Lerche et al., 2020; Löffler et al., 2024). Both task-specific abilities and task-general processes affect RTs and accuracy in similar ways and are thus likely confounded in drift rates. Task-general effects create the illusion that many different abilities are affected by adversity when in fact only one more general process is affected. Consider research on cognitive deficits. Adversity exposure might disrupt general cognitive processes shared across many tasks, such as general processing speed, for example, because of its effects on brain regions that are involved across sev-

eral cognitive abilities (Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014). If so, studies analyzing raw Flanker performance in isolation will find processing speed deficits but wrongly interpret this as an inhibition deficit. Such distinctions matter for both deficit- and strength-based approaches (e.g., does adversity impair broad domains such as executive functioning? Does it enhance specific abilities such as attention shifting?), as well as for real-world interventions grounded in both approaches (e.g., school-based interventions targeting broad domains or specific abilities).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) can disentangle task-general and task-specific processes. For example, it can estimate shared task variance with latent task-general variables. By estimating shared variance across different tasks, we can also obtain more precise estimates of task-specific abilities (i.e., variance unique to specific tasks). Bignardi et al. (2024) recently applied this approach to model how socioeconomic status (SES) is related to standard performance measures in three large data sets. They used SEM to model the effect of SES on a general factor and task-specific residual variances. Lower SES was associated with a lower general ability, but *enhanced* task-specific processing speed, inhibition, and attention shifting. However, their analysis looked at shared and unique variance using raw performance measures. Thus, it is subject to the same limitations outlined in the previous section.

The current study

Here, we analyzed the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study data (<http://abcdstudy.org>). The ABCD study is ideal because it provides a large, representative, and socioeconomically and ethnically diverse sample of 9- to 10 year-olds—an age range characterized by rapid growth in cognitive abilities (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006).

We studied two dimensions of adversity: household threat and material deprivation. These forms of adversity have been widely studied in their relation to cognitive outcomes—from both deficit and strength-based perspectives (Fields et al., 2021; Schäfer et al., 2022; Sheridan et al., 2022; Young et al., 2022)—and are central to contemporary conceptualizations of adversity (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 2021; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014). Prior work has shown that cognitive deprivation is more strongly associated with lower cognitive performance than threat exposure (Salhi et al., 2021; Sheridan et al., 2020). Although material deprivation (as measured here) and cognitive deprivation (in previous studies) are not identical, both seem related to access to resources that support cognitive development (e.g., books in the home, formal education). Indeed, in the ABCD sample material deprivation is highly or moderately correlated with income (-.81) and education (-.56), while correlations with household threat are lower (-.25 and -.12, respectively; DeJoseph et al., 2022). Therefore, to the extent that the deprivation-versus-threat literature has captured ability-relevant processes, we may expect material deprivation to be more strongly associated with lower drift rates than threat exposure.

We analyzed four cognitive abilities that have been studied in relation to adversity. We included *attention shifting* because previous work has reported enhancement of this ability in children and (young) adults with more exposure to environmental unpredictability (based on raw performance switch costs; Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015; Young et al., 2022; but see Nweze et al., 2021). Theoretically, attention shifting is thought to enable people to rapidly adjust to, and take advantage of, a changing environment (e.g., seize fleeting opportunities). We included *inhibition* because previous research suggests that children with more adverse experiences are worse at inhibiting distracting information (based on raw RT difference scores; Fields et al., 2021; Mezzacappa, 2004; Mittal et al., 2015; Tibu et al., 2016). We included *mental rotation* because previous studies have found negative associations between SES and mental rotation ability (based on RTs and accuracy; Assari, 2020; Bignardi et al., 2024). To the extent that these performance differences reflect differences in the respective abilities—as they have been interpreted—they should show up in *task-specific drift rates*. We also included a measure of *processing speed*, which was not measured in relation to adversity but provided a direct measure of the type of basic processing speed that plays a role in the other tasks. Taken together, the four tasks provided a broad assessment of cognitive domains, which makes them well-suited for isolating task-general processes. As all four tasks adhere to DDM assumptions, we could compare them based on the same model parameters.

Adaptation-based frameworks predict increased task-specific drift rates. This follows from the key assumption that adversity shapes specific abilities, rather than general cognitive processes (Ellis et al., 2022; Frankenhuys et al., 2016; Frankenhuys, Young, et al., 2020; Frankenhuys & Weerth, 2013). Task-specific enhancement in the attention-shifting drift rate would align with this assumption, as this ability is thought to be adaptive in changing environments; but enhancement in the task-general drift rate would not. One study reports evidence suggesting that exposure to threat but not deprivation is associated with better attention shifting (Young et al., 2022). If so, we should expect to see higher task-specific drift rates with household threat, but not with material deprivation. Enhanced task-specific drift rates on inhibition and mental rotation would be unexpected yet interesting. It would constitute novel documentation of enhancements, and would suggest that lowered raw performance reflects ability-irrelevant processes. Finally, equivalent drift rates across adversity levels would also not be consistent with strength-based frameworks; rather, such a pattern would suggest that abilities are intact (i.e., not affected by adversity).

Deficit perspectives can accommodate both lowered task-specific and lowered task-general drift rates. On the one hand, past work suggests that adversity impairs specific abilities (e.g., inhibition; Farah et al., 2006; Fields et al., 2021; Mezzacappa, 2004; Mittal et al., 2015). On the other hand, there is also evidence that adversity affects general cognitive ability (Bignardi et al., 2024)—perhaps through its broad effects on brain regions that are involved across several cognitive abilities (Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014). However, equivalent or enhanced drift rates, whether they be task-specific or task-general, would

not be consistent with deficit perspectives; rather, this would suggest that abilities are intact or enhanced.

Our approach adds value in a third way besides separating drift rate from ability-irrelevant factors and isolating task-specific and task-general effects: It allows us to quantify cognitive deficits and enhancements separately within the same model. This is because the task-specific and task-general estimates are statistically independent. Thus, for instance, we may find that adversity lowers general drift rate, as well as some task-specific drift rate (e.g., capturing inhibition), but increases other task-specific drift rates (e.g., capturing attention shifting).

If the drift rates we observe align with previous interpretations of performance differences as outlined above, our findings support existing theories about deficits and enhancements. However, if not drift rates, but non-decision time or boundary separation account for the existing findings, and drift rates do not, neither deficit- or adaptation-based frameworks are supported. This would at a minimum invite reflection—perhaps revision—of the evidence base for (parts of) these frameworks. At the same time, such findings would offer clear directions for future research in this field (e.g., which factors explain variation in non-decision times and/or boundary separation across levels of adversity). Thus, regardless of the specific pattern of outcomes, our analyses contribute to an accurate and refined understanding of how early-life adversity shapes cognitive abilities.

2.2 Methods

Sample

The ABCD study (<http://abcdstudy.org>), is a prospective, longitudinal study of approximately 12,000 youth across the United States. We focused on the baseline assessment, which has the largest collection of cognitive tasks suitable for DDM (Luciana et al., 2018). There were four tasks: (1) Processing Speed Task (Pattern Comparison Processing Speed Task), (2) Attention Shifting Task (Dimensional Change Card Sort Task), (3) Inhibition Task (Flanker Task), and (4) Mental Rotation Task (Little Man Task). At baseline, the study included 11,878 youths (aged between 9 and 10 years old, measured in months) recruited across 21 sites. The study used multi-stage probability sampling to obtain a nationally representative sample (Heeringa et al., 2010). Baseline assessments were completed between September 1st 2016 and August 31st 2018 (see Garavan et al., 2018). Our analysis sample includes 10,687 participants who had trial-level data available on all four⁴ cognitive tasks.

Open Science Statement

All analysis scripts, materials, and instructions needed to reproduce the findings are available on the article's Github repository (https://stefanvermeent.github.io/abcd_ddm/). The raw study data cannot be shared on public repositories. Personal access to the ABCD

dataset is required to fully reproduce our analyses and can be requested at <https://ndar.nih.gov>.

We obtained access to the full ABCD data repository and performed initial data cleaning and analyses *prior* to Stage 1 submission. However, we preprocessed cognitive task data in isolation to prevent biasing the analyses involving independent variables. The goal of these analyses was to assure that the pre-selected cognitive tasks adhered to basic DDM assumptions and had the required trial-level data available in the right format. These initial analyses were preregistered (https://stefanvermeent.github.io/abcd_ddm/preregistrations/README.html).

To increase transparency, we developed an automated workflow (using R and Git) to track the data files read into the analysis environment. First-time access to any data file was automatically tracked via Git, providing an overview including the timestamp, a description of the data, and the R code that was used to read in the data. The supplemental materials provide a detailed description and visual overview of this workflow. An overview of the data access history is provided in the repository's README file (https://stefanvermeent.github.io/abcd_ddm/).

Exclusion Criteria

For the cognitive task data, we applied exclusion criteria in two steps: first, cleaning trial-level data, and second, removing participants with problematic trial-level data (discussed below). For both, most criteria were as preregistered, but a few deviated from or were additional to the preregistration. The data processing steps described below were preregistered unless noted otherwise.

First, we removed RTs of the Attention Shifting, Flanker, and Mental Rotation Tasks that exceeded maximum task-specific RT thresholds (> 10 seconds (0.07%), > 10 seconds (0.04%), and > 5 seconds (< 0.01% of trials), respectively). The Processing Speed Task did not have a programmed time-out. Instead, we cut-off responses > 10 seconds (0.15% of trials) to remove extreme outliers. This step was not preregistered as we did not anticipate these extreme outliers.

Next, we removed trials with: (1) RTs < 300 ms (ranging from 0.01% to 1.03% of trials across tasks); (2) RTs > 3 SD above the participant-level average log-transformed mean RT (ranging from 0.02% to 0.85% of trials across tasks; the same thing was done for RTs < 3 SD on the Processing Speed Task (not preregistered) to remove several fast outliers); (3) trials with missing response times and/or accuracy data (< 0.01% for all tasks except Mental Rotation). We found that the response time-out of 5 seconds on the Mental Rotation Task led to missing responses on 10.55% of trials. This truncated the right-hand tail of the RT distribution, which can bias DDM estimation. Therefore, we decided to impute these values during DDM estimation instead of removing them (see the Supplemental materials for more information).

Next, we excluded participants who (1) had suffered possible mild traumatic brain injury or worse ($n = 118$); (2) showed a response bias of $> 80\%$ on a task (ranging between zero and 212; deviating from the preregistration); (3) had a low number of trials left after trial-level exclusions, defined as < 20 trials for Mental Rotation and Attention Shifting ($n = \text{zero}$ and 19, respectively) and < 15 trials for Flanker and Processing Speed ($n = 64$ and 34, respectively, deviating from the preregistration). Finally, we excluded task data of several participants based on data inspection (not preregistered): two participant with 0% accuracy on the Mental Rotation Task; two participants who showed a sharp decline in accuracy over time on the Processing Speed Task; 49 participants on the Attention Shifting Task who (almost) only made switches across all trials, even on repeat trials. We also decided to include participants with missing data on one or more tasks because our main analyses will use FIML for missing data.

The final sample consisted of 10,563 participants (See Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Descriptive statistics for the training and test set.

	Training	Test
N	1500	9063
Sex (%)	48.7	47.6
Age (Mean (SD))	119 (7.5)	119 (7.4)
Parent highest education in years (Mean (SD))	20.3 (2.4)	20.3 (2.4)
Race		
White (%)	53.5	55.6
Black (%)	16.6	16.1
Hispanic (%)	16.9	15.6
Other (mixed, Asian, AIAN, NHPI)	12.9	12.7
Income-to-needs (Mean (SD))	3.8 (2.4)	3.7 (2.4)

Measures

Cognitive Tasks

Inhibition Task. The NIH Toolbox Flanker task is a measure of cognitive control and attention (Zelazo et al., 2014). On each trial, participants saw five arrows that were positioned side-by-side. The four flanking arrows always pointed in the same direction, either left or right. The central arrow either pointed in the same direction (congruent trials) or in the opposite direction (incongruent trials). Participants were instructed to always ignore the flanking arrows and to indicate whether the central arrow is pointing left or right. After four practice trials, participants completed 20 test trials, of which 12 were congruent ($Mean_{RT} = 0.84$ seconds, $SD = 0.28$) and eight were incongruent ($Mean_{RT} = 1.02$ seconds, $SD = 0.44$). The standard outcome measure is a normative composite of accuracy and RT. For more information on the exact calculation, see Slotkin et al. (2012).

Processing Speed Task. The NIH Toolbox Pattern Comparison Processing Speed task (Carlozzi et al., 2015) is a measure of visual processing. On each trial, participants saw two images and judged whether the images were the same or different. When images were different, they varied on one of three dimensions: color, adding or taking something away, or containing more or less of a particular item. The standard outcome measure is the number of items answered correctly in 90 seconds (normalized). On average, participants completed 38.96 trials ($Mean_{RT} = 2.24$ seconds, $SD = 0.47$).

Attention Shifting Task. The NIH Toolbox Dimensional Change Card Sort Task is a measure of attention shifting or cognitive flexibility (Zelazo, 2006; Zelazo et al., 2014). A white rabbit and green boat were presented at the bottom of the screen. Participants matched a third object to the rabbit or boat based on either color or shape. After eight practice trials, participants completed 30 test trials alternating between shape and color in pseudo-random order. Of these, 23 were *repeat* trials (i.e., the sorting rule was the same as on the previous trial; $Mean_{RT} = 1$ seconds, $SD = 0.36$) and 7 were *switch* trials (i.e., the sorting rule was different than on the previous trial; $Mean_{RT} = 1.03$ seconds, $SD = 0.39$). The standard outcome measure is a normative composite of accuracy and RT. For more information on the exact calculation, see Slotkin et al. (2012).

Mental Rotation Task. The Little Man task (referred to in this article as the Mental Rotation task) is a measure of visual-spatial processing (Luciana et al., 2018). Participants saw a simple picture of a male figure holding a briefcase in his left or right hand. They had to indicate whether the briefcase was in the left or right hand. The image could have one of four orientations: right side up or upside down, and facing towards or away from the participant. Thus, on half of the trials, participants had to mentally rotate the image in order to make the decision. Participants first completed three practice trials and then completed 32 test trials ($Mean_{RT} = 2.65$, $SD = 0.47$). The standard outcome measure is an efficiency measure, calculated as the percentage correct divided by the average RT.

Adversity measures

Material deprivation. We assessed material deprivation with seven items from the parent-reported ABCD Demographics Questionnaire. These items originate from the Parent-Reported Financial Adversity Questionnaire (Diemer et al., 2013). The items assess whether or not (1 = Yes, 0 = No) the youth's family experienced several economic hardships over the 12 months prior to the assessment (e.g., 'Needed food but couldn't afford to buy it or couldn't afford to go out to get it').

We used a previously created factor score of this measure derived from MNLFA (Bauer, 2017). This score empirically adjusts for measurement non-invariance across sociodemographic characteristics and creates person-specific factor scores that enhance measurement precision and individual variation (Curran et al., 2014). In short, MNLFA scores assume a common scale of measurement across groups and age, as well as adjust for measurement biases that would have otherwise biased our substantive analyses. De-

Joseph et al. (2022) describe how this score was computed. Higher scores indicate more material deprivation.

Household threat. We assessed threat experienced in the youth's home using the Family Conflict subscale of the ABCD Family Environment Scale (Moos, 1994; Zucker et al., 2018). The subscale consisted of nine items assessing conflict with family members (e.g., 'We fight a lot in our family'). Items were endorsed with either 1 (True) or 0 (False). Two items are positively valenced and will therefore be reverse-scored. Similar to material deprivation, we used a previously-created factor score of this measure derived from MNLFA (DeJoseph et al., 2022). Higher scores indicate more threat exposure.

Sociodemographic covariates. Several sociodemographic covariates were included in the SEM models (see Planned Main Analyses) that use the MNLFA scores representing material deprivation and household threat exposure. This is because MNLFA scores are adjusted for these covariates. Thus, it is recommended that variation in these covariates is also adjusted for in dependent variables (Bauer, 2017).

We calculated income-to-needs ratios by first taking the average of each binned income (< \$5000, \$5,000–\$11,999, \$12,000–\$15,999, \$16,000–\$24,999, \$25,000–\$34,999, \$35,000–\$49,999, \$50,000–\$74,999, \$75,000–\$99,999, \$100,000–\$199,999, ≥ \$200,000) as a rough approximation of the family's total reported income. Then we divided income by the federal poverty threshold for the year at which a family was interviewed (range = \$12,486–\$50,681), adjusted for the number of persons in the home. We used highest education (in years) out of the two caregivers (or one if a second caregiver was not provided) as a continuous variable. We collapsed youth race into 4 levels (White, Black, Hispanic, Other) and subsequently dummy-coded with White (the most numerous racial group) serving as the reference category in all models. We dichotomized youth sex such that 1 = Female and 0 = Male. We used youth age (in months) as a continuous variable and centered on the mean.

Analysis Pipeline

Primary analyses

The approved Stage 1 Protocol for this manuscript can be found on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/4n8qr>). Before conducting analyses, we split the full sample up in a training set ($n = 1,500$) and a test set ($n \approx 8,500$). We conducted our main analyses in three steps (see Figure 2.2): (1) fitting the DDM to the cognitive task data; (2) fitting the SEM model to the adversity and DDM data and optimize it where necessary based on the training set; (3) Refitting the model to the test data and interpret the regression coefficients. We conducted a simulation-based power analysis based on the main SEM model (see Figure 2.3), with standardized regression coefficients of 0.06, 0.08 and 0.1 and the alpha level set to .05. The analysis indicated that we would have more than 90% power for all regression paths with N between 2,500 ($\beta = 0.1$) and 6,500 ($\beta = 0.06$).

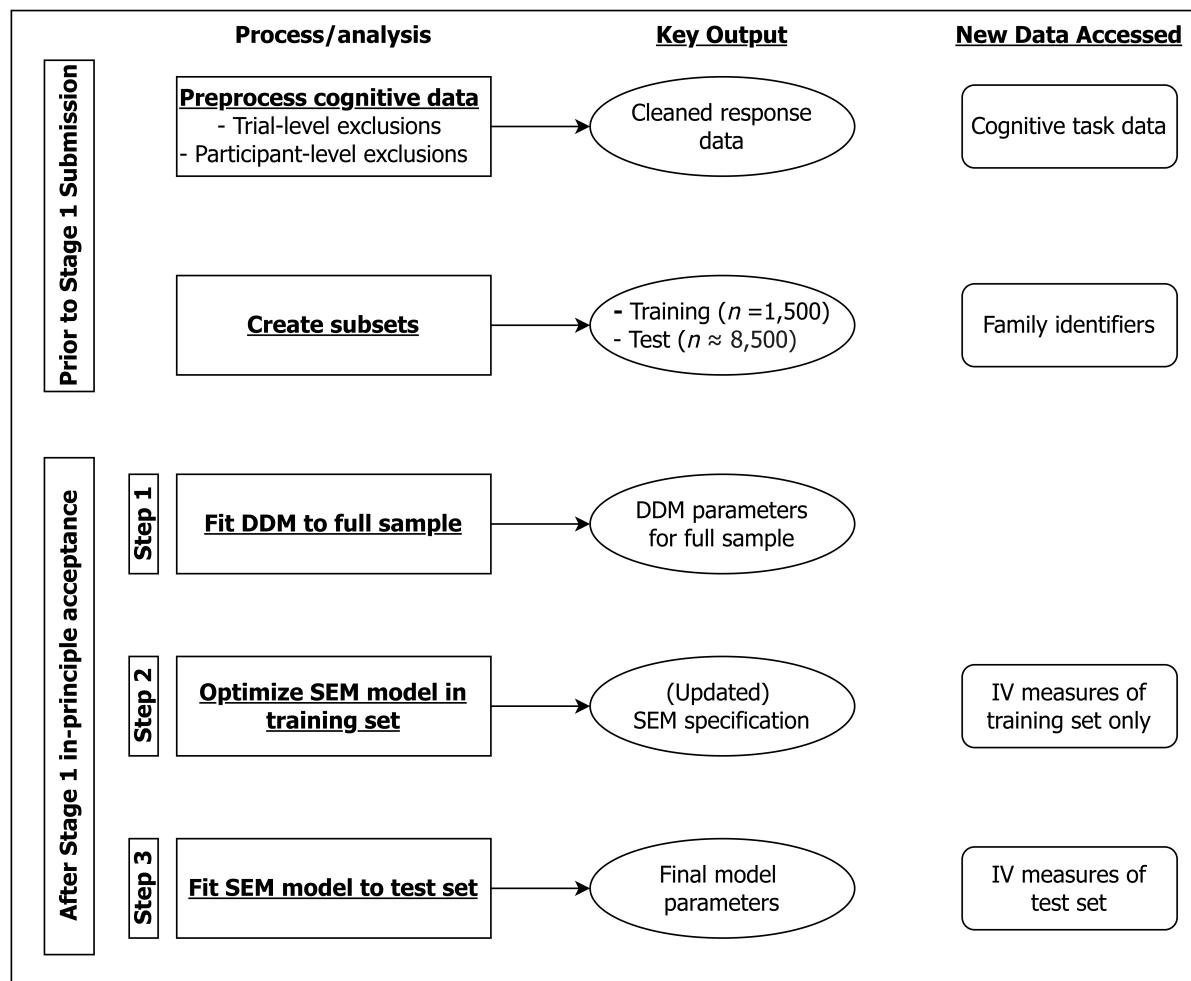


Figure 2.2. Visual overview of the full analysis workflow. Analyses are done in two stages: (1) prior to Stage 1 submission of the manuscript, and (2) after Stage 1 in-principle acceptance. Analyses at Stage 1 only focus on the cognitive task data. Independent variables (i.e., threat and deprivation measures) will only be accessed during Stage 2 after all DDM models have been fit, and only for the test set after the model has been optimized based on the training set. Data access will be tracked via the GitHub repository. IV = independent variable; SEM = structural equation modeling; DDM = Drift Diffusion Model.

All analyses were conducted in R 4.2.1 (Team, 2022). The source code can be found on the Github repository (https://stefanvermeent.github.io/abcd_ddm/scripts/README.html).

Step 1: DDM estimation. The DDM was fit to each cognitive task in a hierarchical Bayesian framework which estimates DDM parameters both on the individual and group level (Vandekerckhove et al., 2011; Wiecki et al., 2013). We use code provided by D. J. Johnson et al. (2017). The benefit of this approach is that group-level information is leveraged to estimate individual-level estimates. This differs from classic DDM estimation approaches where the model is fitted to the data of each participant separately (Voss et al., 2013). This is particularly useful in developmental samples like the ABCD dataset which

have a limited number of trials per participant but substantially larger sample sizes than is typical in the DDM literature⁵.

All models freely estimated the drift rate, non-decision time, and boundary separation while constraining response bias to 0.5 (i.e., assuming no bias towards a particular response option). For the Flanker and Attention Shifting Task, we compared model versions that separately estimate drift rate and non-decision-time per task condition or collapsed across conditions. Boundary separation was constrained to be the same across conditions. For the Processing Speed Task and the Mental Rotation Task, we estimated DDM parameters across all trials. The best-fitting model of each task was used to estimate participant-level DDM parameters. See the supplement for more information about model fitting procedures.

Step 2: Model optimization in training set. We first estimated and (where necessary) optimized the SEM in the training set using the *lavaan* package (Rosseel, 2012). This goal of this step was to investigate whether we needed to adjust the model specification in any way (e.g., add residual correlations, introduce or reduce constraints of factor loadings, etc.) to achieve good model fit. For this reason, the model fitted in this step was not interpreted to address our research aims.

See Figure 2.3 for the *a-priori* specification of the model. In the measurement model, all three DDM parameters across all tasks (i.e., drift rates, non-decision times, and boundary separations) loaded on separate latent factors for each parameter type. Unique (residual) variances of the manifest (i.e., measured) DDM parameters were captured in additional latent factors (one per parameter). The structural model estimated regression paths going from each adversity measure (see Adversity measures) to the general latent factors and to the unique variances of the DDM parameters of each task. For model identification reasons, we did not estimate regression paths to the unique variances of the Processing Speed Task. We first estimated and optimized the measurement models separately for each diffusion model parameter, which allowed us to efficiently detect sources of potential badness of fit. Once measurement models provided an adequate account of the data, we integrated them into the structural model shown in Figure 2.3. In addition, clustering of siblings and twins within families was accounted for using the *lavaan.survey* package (Oberski, 2014). Finally, the sociodemographic covariates that were included in the MNLFA scores (see Measures section above) were controlled for in the SEM. Goodness-of-fit was assessed using the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the comparative fit index (CFI). Following Hu & Bentler (1999), CFI values $> .90$ and RMSEA values $< .08$ were interpreted as acceptable model fit and CFI values $> .95$ and RMSEA values $\leq .06$ as good model fit.

Step 3: Model validation in test set. After optimizing the model based on the training set, we refit it to the test data. Model fit was assessed the same way as at Step 2. The re-

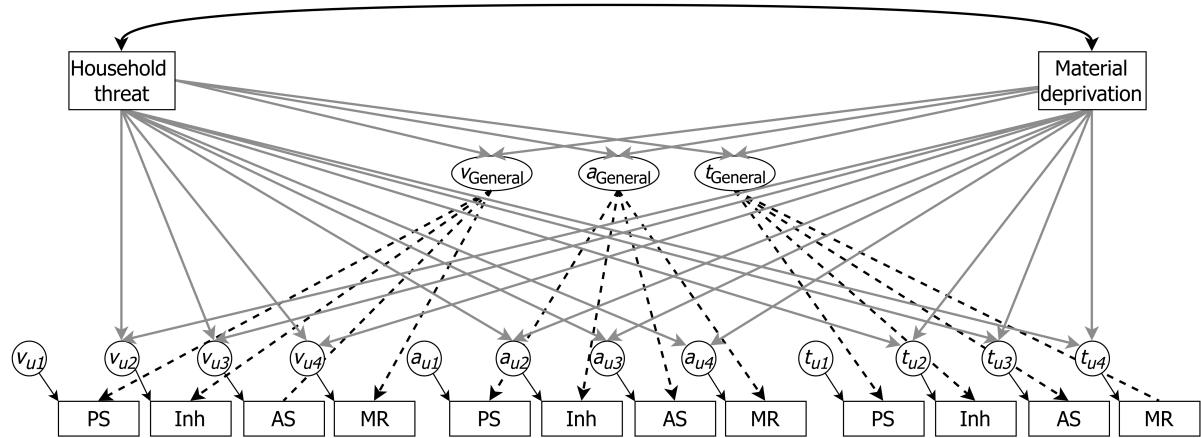


Figure 2.3. Visualization of the full structural equation model (SEM). Ellipses represent task-general factors. Circles represent task-specific (residual) variances. Dotted black lines represent covariances. Dashed black lines represent factor loadings. Solid grey lines represent regression paths. The factor loadings to each of the Processing Speed Task indicators are fixed to 1. The factor loadings of the task-specific factors are fixed to 1 and the residual variances of the manifest indicators are fixed to 0. For model identification reasons, we do not estimate regression paths to the unique variances of the Processing Speed Task. Not shown in this Figure to improve readability: (1) the sociodemographic covariates that are included in the MNLFA scores (see Measures section); (2) covariances between the task-general factors and the task-specific factors within each task. PS = Processing Speed Task; AS = Attention Shifting Task; MR = Mental Rotation Task; Inh = Inhibition Task; v = Drift rate; a = Boundary separation; t_0 = Non-decision time.

gression coefficients of these models were interpreted to address our research questions. We controlled for multiple testing in the regression paths based on the false discovery rate (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995; Cribbie, 2007). We did so separately for tests involving drift rates, non-decision times, and boundary separations, as we had different hypotheses for each of these parameters. In addition, we were interested in determining if standardized effects that fell between -.10 and .10 were consistent with an actual null effect. For regression coefficients falling within these bounds, we therefore used two one-sided tests (TOST) equivalence testing using -.10 and .10 as bounds.

2.3 Results

Model fit

DDM

Based on an assessment of model fit, we selected the following good-fitting DDM models for the substantive analysis: 1) *Mental Rotation Task*, the standard model; 2) *Inhibition Task*, the standard model with one set of parameter estimates across conditions; 3) *Attention Shifting Task*, the standard model with one set of parameter estimates across conditions; 4) *Processing Speed Task*, the standard model, but with RTs < 1 s excluded to solve

issues with fast outliers. See the supplemental materials for a full overview of the DDM fitting results.

The preregistered simulation-based model fit analysis yielded four (out of 16) correlations between observed and simulated RTs/accuracy that fell below the .80 cut-off: accuracies for Inhibition (.79), Attention Shifting (.73), Processing Speed (.65), and the 75th percentile of RTs for Mental Rotation (.76). However, further analyses showed that all correlations were $> .80$ when we simulated 100 trials for each task, instead of the same number of trials as the real data. This suggested that the low correlations did not indicate bad parameter recovery, but rather a limitation in the preregistered procedure. Therefore, we decided against further changes to the models or the removal of data points. We provide more details about the model fit procedure, as well as the nature and reason of the deviation, in the supplemental materials (as well as the model fit results for the preregistered and updated approach).

Table 2.2 shows bivariate correlations between DDM parameters and adversity measures. Both material deprivation and household threat showed small, negative associations with drift rates across all four tasks, suggesting that participants with more adversity exposure processed information more slowly. In addition, both material deprivation and household threat were positively associated with boundary separation (indicating more response caution) in all tasks except Mental Rotation, although most of these correlations were very small. Finally, material deprivation and household threat showed a small, negative correlation with non-decision times on the Mental Rotation Task, but not with non-decision times on the other tasks.

Table 2.1. Bivariate correlations between DDM parameters and measures of adversity.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Drift Rate														
1. Flanker	-													
2. Att. Shift.	0.43	-												
3. Men. Rot.	0.27	0.30	-											
4. Proc. Speed	0.31	0.39	0.19	-										
Boundary Separation														
5. Flanker	-0.28	-0.12	-0.08	-0.12	-									
6. Att. Shift.	-0.40	-0.36	-0.14	-0.26	0.47	-								
7. Men. Rot.	0.00	0.01	0.29	-0.05	0.06	0.09	-							
8. Proc. Speed	-0.29	-0.23	-0.11	-0.28	0.33	0.42	0.11	-						
Non-Decision Time														
9. Flanker	-0.03	0.05	-0.00	0.02	0.52	0.33	0.05	0.23	-					
10. Att. Shift.	-0.07	0.02	-0.05	-0.02	0.34	0.21	0.03	0.20	0.40	-				
11. Men. Rot.	0.15	0.21	0.27	0.12	0.08	0.01	0.14	0.04	0.19	0.16	-			
12. Proc. Speed	-0.07	-0.02	-0.07	0.01	0.26	0.20	0.02	0.12	0.28	0.30	0.16	-		
Adversity														
13. Mat. Dep.	-0.19	-0.23	-0.21	-0.11	0.06	0.14	-0.08	0.11	-0.00	0.00	-0.14	-0.02	-	
14. Househ. Thr.	-0.12	-0.15	-0.10	-0.10	0.02	0.06	-0.03	0.07	-0.03	-0.02	-0.08	-0.02	0.26	-
Mean	2.91	1.49	0.25	1.47	2.95	2.12	2.88	2.89	0.34	0.33	1.15	1.22	0.05	-0.06
SD	0.87	0.39	0.26	0.38	0.41	0.45	0.44	0.47	0.08	0.08	0.28	0.14	1.05	0.83
Skew	-0.25	-0.21	0.58	0.18	-0.10	0.25	-0.49	-0.15	0.06	0.44	-0.30	-0.06	0.73	0.52
Kurtosis	-0.28	0.05	0.02	-0.18	0.53	-0.13	0.28	-0.36	-0.41	-0.21	0.35	0.03	0.11	-0.57

Note: Att. Shift. = Attention Shifting; Men. Rot. = Mental Rotation; Proc. Speed = Processing Speed; Mat. Dep. = Material Deprivation; Househ. Thr. = Household Threat

SEM

The SEM model was incrementally constructed in the training data in order to detect any parts that might need adjustment. All parts of the model provided an acceptable to good account of the training data (full training model: CFI = .98, RMSEA = .04). Therefore, we did not make any adjustments to the model before applying it to the test data (N = 9063). The full model also provided a good account of the test data (CFI = .98, RMSEA = .05).

Figure 2.4 presents a simplified overview of the measurement part of the final model in the test data (excluding task-specific covariances and regression paths involving the adversity measures). The factor loadings of the Mental Rotation Task were low for all DDM parameters, suggesting that performance on this task differs substantially from performance on the other tasks. All tasks showed a statistically significant portion of task-specific variance after accounting for task-general effects. Task-general drift rate and task-general boundary separation were negatively correlated ($r = -0.57$), while task-general boundary separation and task-general non-decision time were positively correlated ($r = .71$). These findings show that youth who processed information faster were less cautious in decision-making than those who processed information more slowly, and that more cautious youth were slower in executing non-decision processes (e.g., encoding, response execution) than less cautious youth. Task-specific correlations between DDM parameters of the same tasks ranged between $r = .02$ and $r = .34$.

Primary analysis

Our primary analysis examined to what extent household threat and material deprivation were associated with task-specific and task-general aspects of speed of information pro-

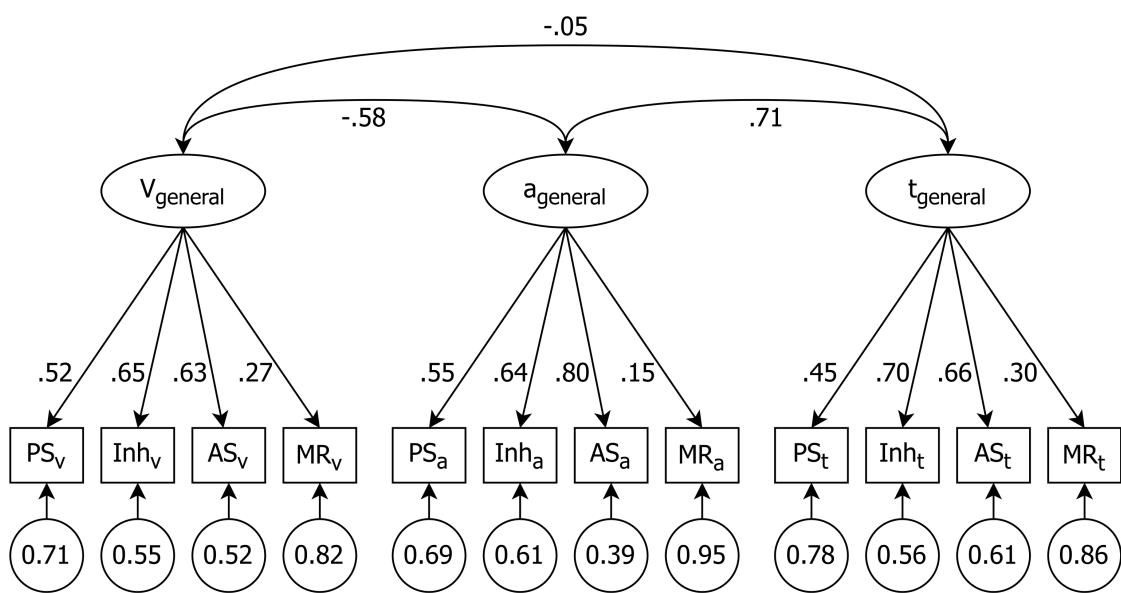


Figure 2.4. Simplified overview of the measurement part of the final SEM model, including standardized factor loadings, unstandardized residual variances, and correlations between the general latent factors. Excluding task-specific residual covariances and regression paths (see Figure 2.5). The elipses represent latent task-general factors. The circles represent latent task-specific factors. v = drift rate; a = boundary separation; t_0 = non-decision time; PS = Processing Speed Task; AS = Attention Shifting Task; MR = Mental Rotation Task; Inh = Inhibition Task.

cessing (drift rates), response caution (boundary-separations), and task preparation/execution (non-decision times). Task-general effects capture variance shared across tasks, whereas task-specific effects capture variance unique to specific tasks. The results are summarized in Figure 2.5.

For household threat, we found a significant negative association with task-general drift rate ($\beta = -0.12$, 95% CI = $[-0.16, -0.08]$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants with more exposure to household threat processed information more slowly in general. All task-specific drift rates were practically equivalent at different levels of household threat. We also found a significant positive association between household threat and task-general boundary separation ($\beta = 0.08$, 95% CI = $[0.04, 0.12]$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants with more exposure to household threat generally responded with more caution. In contrast, we found a negative association between household threat and task-specific boundary separation in the Attention Shifting Task ($\beta = -0.07$, 95% CI = $[-0.11, -0.02]$, $p = .013$), indicating that participants with more exposure to household threat responded with less caution in this task. The association between household threat and task-specific boundary separation on the Inhibition Task was also significant, but fell in the region of practical equivalence. Both task-general non-decision time and task-specific non-decision times were practically equivalent at different levels of household threat.

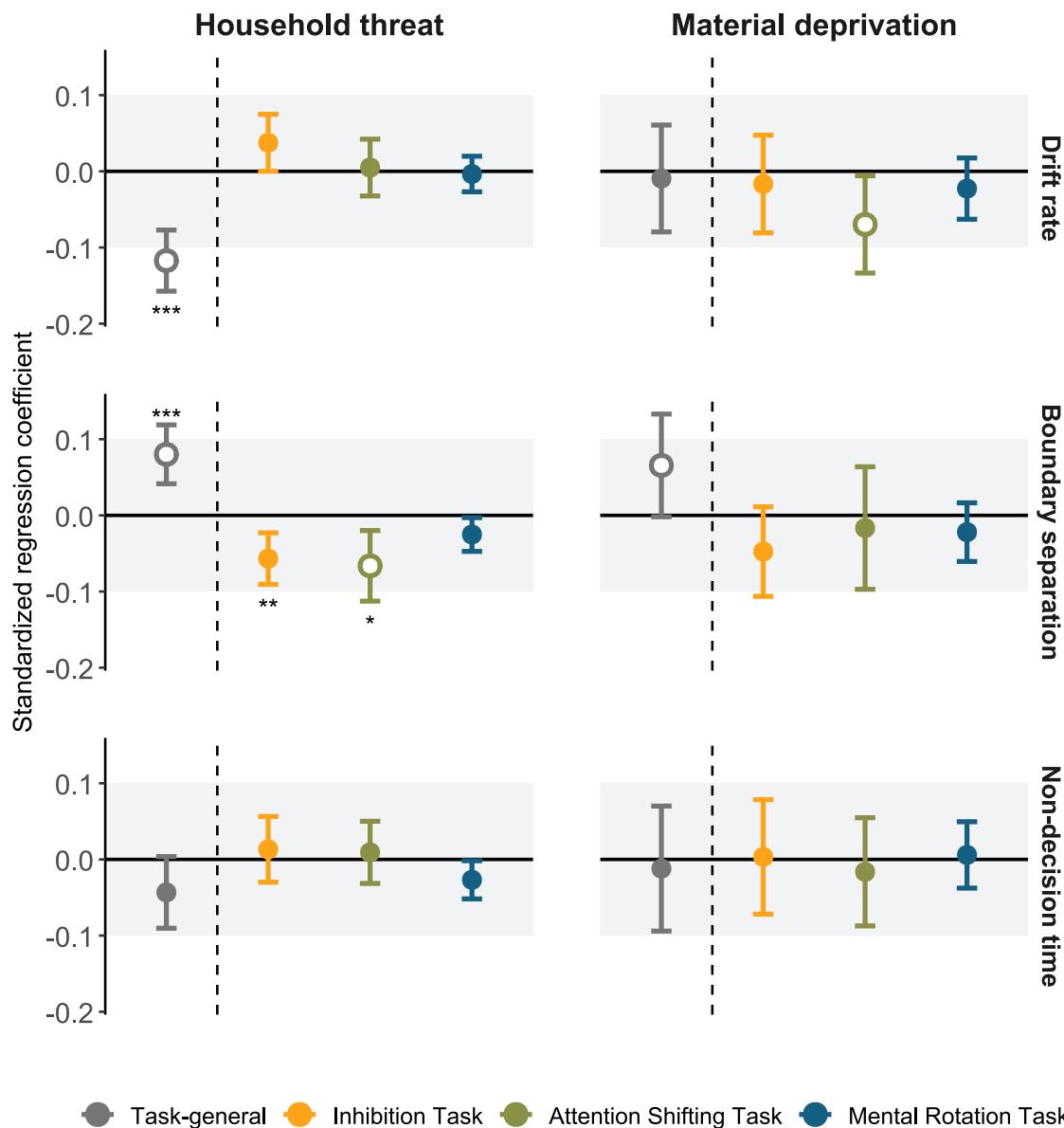


Figure 2.5. Results of the structural part of the SEM model testing the effect of household threat and material deprivation on task-specific and task-general DDM parameters. The top row plots the drift rates, the middle row plots the boundary separations, and the bottom row plots the non-decision times. The gray area reflects the area of practical equivalence. Hollow points indicate effects outside the area of practical equivalence. Solid points indicate effects inside the area of practical equivalence. Standard-errors represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance (tested against zero) is indicated with significance asterisks.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

For material deprivation, the associations with task-general drift rate, as well as with all task-specific drift rates, were not significantly different from zero. We found evidence for practical equivalence for task-general drift rate and the task-specific drift rates of the

Inhibition Task and the Mental Rotation Task. However, we did not find evidence for practical equivalence for the task-specific drift rate of Attention Shifting, suggesting that participants with higher levels of material deprivation might be somewhat slower at shifting attention. The association between material deprivation and task-general boundary separation was neither significantly different from zero ($\beta = 0.07$, 95% CI = [-0.00, 0.13], $p = .091$), nor practically equivalent ($p = .159$). Thus, participants with more exposure to material deprivation might generally respond with somewhat more caution, but the effect size of this relationship is likely not meaningful. All of the task-specific boundary separations were practically equivalent at different levels of material deprivation. Both task-general non-decision time and task-specific non-decision times were practically equivalent at different levels of material deprivation.

Exploratory analysis

To situate our primary analysis in the context of the broader literature based on raw performance measures, we decided to run a similar SEM model based on raw performance measures of the four cognitive tasks. We used the measures as provided in the ABCD database (Luciana et al., 2018). For the Processing Speed Task, the traditional raw measure is the number of correctly completed trials. For the Mental Rotation Task, the traditional raw measure is the percentage correct divided by the mean response time on correct trials. For the Attention Shifting and Inhibition Task, the traditional raw measure is a composite of accuracy and RT (Slotkin et al., 2012). The model was the same as the primary analysis, with the exception that it included only one task-general factor. Like the primary models, the exploratory model provided a good account of the test data (CFI = 1, RMSEA = 0.04).

The results are summarized in Figure 2.6. Similarly to the primary analysis, household threat was significantly negatively associated with task-general performance. In addition, we found a significant—but practically equivalent—positive association between household threat and task-specific Flanker performance. All of the other effects were practically equivalent at different levels of adversity.

2.4 Discussion

Our aim was to better understand how two types of adversity—household threat and material deprivation—are associated with performance differences on three tasks covering inhibition, attention shifting, and mental rotation. First, we used DDM to distinguish between three potential sources for performance differences: 1) the speed of information processing (drift rates), 2) response caution (boundary separation), and 3) the speed of encoding and response execution (non-decision time). Second, we used SEM to investigate if observed differences in each DDM parameter were task-general (i.e., shared across all tasks) or task-specific (i.e., unique to a specific task). Negative associations between adversity and either task-general or task-specific drift rates would be consistent with existing deficit frameworks. Positive associations between adversity and task-specific drift rates would be consistent with existing adaptation frameworks. In contrast, associations

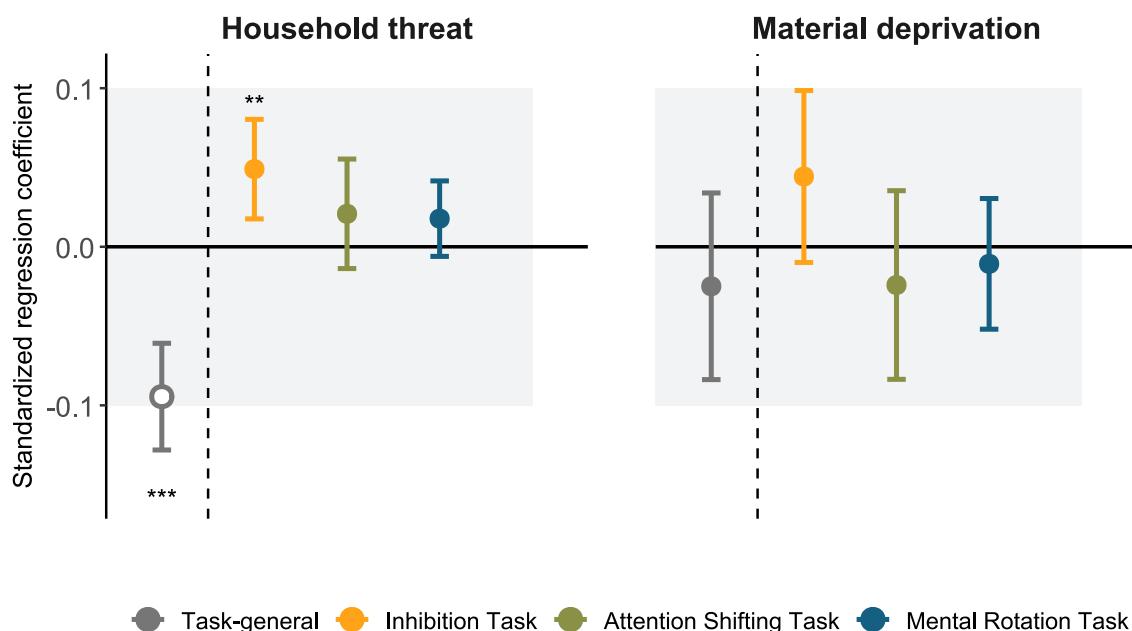


Figure 2.6. Exploratory analysis testing the association between household threat and material deprivation on task-specific and task-general raw performance measures. The gray area reflects the area of practical equivalence. Hollow points indicate effects outside the area of practical equivalence. Solid points indicate effects inside the area of practical equivalence. Standard-errors represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance (tested against zero) is indicated with significance stars.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

with other DDM parameters, or equivalent drift rates, would not be consistent with either framework.

Primary findings

Our results provided some support for deficit frameworks, but not for adaptation frameworks. Higher levels of household threat (but not material deprivation) were associated with lower task-general speed of information processing. This was consistent with deficit frameworks, although based on previous literature, we actually expected stronger deficit patterns for deprivation than for threat (Salhi et al., 2021; Sheridan et al., 2020; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014). Inconsistent with either deficit or adaptation frameworks, task-specific inhibition and mental rotation abilities were intact. The only exception was the negative association between material deprivation and attention shifting, where we did not find evidence for a significant attention shifting difference, nor for truly intact shifting. Finally, both household threat and material deprivation led to more response caution, although the evidence for material deprivation was weak (not significantly different from zero, but also not practically equivalent to zero). We did not find any differences in task-general or task-specific aspects of task preparation and response execution.

The finding that most task-specific abilities—after accounting for task-general processing speed—were not affected by either type of adversity was striking in light of the existing literature. It suggests that specific executive functions (i.e., inhibition, attention shifting, mental rotation) of youth with more adversity exposure were comparable with those of youth from low-adversity contexts. This is inconsistent with previous interpretations of adversity-related performance differences based on raw performance measures. For example, a previous study showed enhanced attention-shifting performance in youth with more exposure to threat (Young et al., 2022; for similar findings with environmental and caregiver unpredictability, see Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015). In addition, youth from adversity have previously been found to perform worse on inhibition tasks (Farah et al., 2006; Fields et al., 2021; Mezzacappa, 2004; Mittal et al., 2015; Noble et al., 2005), and previous investigations in the ABCD study found negative associations between SES and mental rotation (Assari, 2020; Bignardi et al., 2024).

Instead, higher levels of household threat were associated with a lower task-general drift rate. We argue that this is likely to reflect a slower basic speed of processing for three reasons. First, previous studies showed that performance on executive functioning tasks involves basic processing speed (Frischkorn et al., 2019), with one study suggesting that it may be the predominant factor explaining individual differences on executive functioning tasks (Löffler et al., 2024). Second, we included a simple Processing Speed Task to inform and scale each task-general factor. Third, the drift rates of the Flanker and Attention Shifting Task were collapsed across incongruent (switch) and congruent (repeat) trials. Thus, it is likely that the task-general drift rate accounted not only for variance related to incongruent (shift) trials, but also for variance related to the congruent (repeat) trials, which are generally thought to involve mostly basic processing. While we consider the basic processing speed interpretation most likely given these reasons, we note that others have proposed that shared variance among executive functioning tasks predominantly reflects executive attention, or the ability to avoid distraction and to focus and maintain attention (Mashburn et al., 2023; Zelazo & Carlson, 2023). More research is warranted to test these two hypotheses against each other.

Our results align to some extent with two recent investigations. First, Bignardi et al. (2024) conducted a study in three large datasets—among which the ABCD study—in which they used SEM to separate task-general variance from task-specific variance. They found that SES was positively associated with lower task-general performance in all datasets, but after accounting for task-general performance, found many instances of practically equivalent performance. Interestingly, they found negative associations (meaning better performance) between SES and the Flanker and Attention Shifting Task in the ABCD data. Second, Young & Vermeent (2023) examined associations between SES and unpredictability with performance on an achievement task battery, comparing specific subtasks to overall performance across tasks. Similar to our findings, lower SES was associated with lower overall performance, but with intact (or even enhanced) performance on most spe-

cific subtasks, relative to the overall effect. However, these studies did not separate cognitive abilities from other processes such as response caution.

Household threat (and to a lesser extent material deprivation) was also associated with more task-general response caution. Traditional assessments could misinterpret this as impaired ability, as it slows down responses. In contrast, task-specific response caution was lower for the Attention Shifting and Inhibition Task (although the latter was practically equivalent). Thus, youth with more exposure to household threat are generally more cautious, but become less cautious specifically when processing conflicting information (i.e., distractions on the Inhibition Task and changing task-demands on the Attention Shifting Task). What might explain these differences? In comparing deficit and adaptation frameworks, we focused mainly on cognitive abilities with a clear performance benchmark (e.g., higher drift rates reflecting better performance). Differences in response caution reflect strategies, not abilities (Frankenhuis, Young, et al., 2020). However, we speculate that these findings could reflect contextually appropriate adaptive responses to threatening conditions. Evidence across multiple species suggests that a high probability of threat tends to increase general response caution (prioritizing accuracy over speed), to avoid costly mistakes (Chittka et al., 2009). However, under acute threat, prioritizing speed over accuracy might be better (e.g., fleeing even though there was no threat). Although the Inhibition and Attention Shifting Task did not signal threat, they did evoke competing demands and conflicting information. In real-life settings, such environmental cues could signal a threat, in which case prioritizing speed over accuracy would facilitate rapid detection and responding (Frankenhuis et al., 2016; Mittal et al., 2015). However, as neither pattern was preregistered, we should calibrate our interpretations accordingly.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

The current study has several strengths. First, the analyses were based on the ABCD sample, a large, representative US sample. Second, we developed a framework that can simultaneously account for adversity-related impairments and enhancements and captures cognitive processes that are more theoretically meaningful than raw scores. Third, we used measures of material deprivation and household threat that were corrected for measurement non-invariance using MNLFA, resulting in unbiased estimates of both dimensions of adversity.

The current study also had limitations. First, we were only able to include three cognitive abilities (aside from processing speed) that were compatible with DDM assumptions. This inevitably excluded many important abilities, which limited the scope of what is captured both in task-general and task-specific processes. Second, because of the low number of trials per task we were unable to separately model the task conditions of the Flanker and Attention Shifting Task. This may have made the task-specific estimates less precise measures of inhibition and attention shifting. Third, despite the enhanced individual variation gained from the MNLFA scores, items composing those scores of household threat and material deprivation were binary, asking for the presence or absence of certain ex-

posures over the last 12 months. Therefore, we were not able to account for the role of frequency and severity of those experiences in that window (let alone over the whole of ontogeny). Fourth, while household threat was child-reported, material deprivation was parent-reported. Thus, the measure of material deprivation might not have fully captured youths' own subjective perception, which may partly explain why household threat was more strongly related to cognitive performance than material deprivation.

Future research can build on this study in a couple of ways. First, it will be important to better understand the processes making up task-general drift rate. To this end, future research should include measures of candidate processes (e.g., basic processing speed, attention maintenance), ideally several measures per process to obtain good latent estimates. In addition, neuro imaging data could be linked directly to DDM parameters to investigate which brain networks are associated with differences in task-general drift rates (e.g., Schubert & Frischkorn, 2020). Second, future research could aim to better understand task-general and task-specific differences in response caution. For example, do youth from adversity show more task-general response caution due to performance anxiety? If so, does such anxiety interfere more with their performance on some tasks than others? Can training programs targeting anxiety boost their performance? Third, our approach could be extended to model developmental trajectories of the cognitive processes as a function of adversity.

Our approach of combining DDM and SEM can also enrich perspectives that promote using culturally-sensitive assessments of executive functioning that relate better to youths pre-existing goals, values, and lived experiences (Doebel, 2020; Miller-Cotto et al., 2022; Niebaum & Munakata, 2023; Nketia et al., 2023; Zuilkowski et al., 2016; also see Zelazo & Carlson, 2023). We agree that more ecologically relevant assessments are needed, but, to the extent that they also rely on response times and accuracy, will suffer from some of the same methodological limitations as traditional tasks. This is exemplified by recent attempts to make task-content more ecologically relevant. While promising, the effects are sometimes difficult to interpret, with different types of content affecting performance in unexpected and inconsistent ways—in some cases helping and in others hindering performance. For instance, testing materials involving money can help to close achievement gaps on working memory tasks (Young et al., 2022), but at the same time harm performance on mathematics exams (Duquennois, 2022; Muskens, 2019). This could mean that 1) the effect of these materials on performance is task or domain-specific, and 2) that specific manipulations can have different—even opposing—effects depending on the relevant process. Our approach offers a crucial tool to systematically unpack these differences and to understand how interventions can be best tailored to a child's unique circumstances given a particular cognitive domain.

2.5 Conclusion

Taken together, we find that adversity is mostly associated with task-general processes, as well as ability-irrelevant response caution, yet that task-specific abilities are mostly

intact. This suggests that traditional cognitive assessments may overestimate the effect of adversity on youth's specific abilities (both impairments and enhancements). Our analytical approach provides a solution. By combining DDM and SEM approaches, we can start to develop a more nuanced understanding of how adversity affects different aspects of cognitive performance among youth and across development. This approach requires large datasets containing multiple cognitive tasks, a requirement that is increasingly feasible with the availability of large, secondary datasets in developmental science (Kievit et al., 2022). Thus, we can develop a more balanced, well-rounded understanding of how adversity shapes cognitive development that integrates both deficit and adaptation perspectives.

**Chapter 3. Adversity is associated with lower general processing speed
rather than specific executive functioning abilities**

This chapter is based on

Vermeent, S., Schubert, A.-L., & Frankenhuys, W.E. Adversity is associated with lower general processing speed rather than specific executive functioning abilities. *Submitted for publication.* <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/kqhf7>

3.0 Abstract

Exposure to adversity may impair executive functioning (i.e., deficit frameworks), but could also enhance, or leave intact, specific EF abilities (i.e., adaptation frameworks). Both frameworks often use raw performance (e.g., speed) to estimate EF ability. However, this approach (1) conflates different cognitive processes, and (2) generally does not distinguish specific EF abilities from processes that are shared across EF tasks, such as general processing speed. Here, we integrate deficit and adaptation frameworks by building bridges with mathematical and cognitive psychology. Specifically, we use cognitive modeling (Drift Diffusion Modeling) to isolate different cognitive processes: speed of information accumulation, response caution, and speed of stimulus encoding and response execution. We then use structural equation modeling to investigate whether associations between adversity and cognitive processes are task-general or ability-specific. We recruited 1061 participants from the Dutch LISS panel. Participants completed a basic processing speed task, two inhibition tasks, and three attention-shifting tasks. We measured exposure to threat and material deprivation in childhood and adulthood. Exposure to threat (but not material deprivation) in adulthood was negatively associated with task-general processing speed. After accounting for task-general processes, remaining variance was not related to either inhibition or attention-shifting ability. Non-preregistered analyses showed that childhood exposure to material deprivation and threat were negatively associated with (1) general processing speed, and (2) task-specific information accumulation. The latter reflected unique features of individual tasks, rather than specific EF abilities. Taken together, these results suggest that adversity researchers overestimate associations between adversity and specific EF abilities when analyzing raw performance.

Author contributions

All authors were involved in conceptualizing the study. SV accessed and analyzed the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors provided feedback on the manuscript.

3.1 Introduction

Psychologists have used two main frameworks to explain associations between adversity exposure—such as material deprivation or threat—and executive functioning (EF); one focuses on deficits, the other on adaptation. Deficit frameworks predict that adverse experiences impair brain structure and function in ways that undermine social and cognitive abilities (Farah et al., 2006; Merz et al., 2019; Rosen et al., 2018; Ursache & Noble, 2016a). Adaptation frameworks predict that adverse experiences can lead to the development of intact or enhanced EF abilities, specifically those abilities useful for solving challenges posed by adverse environments (Ellis et al., 2022; Frankenhuys, Young, et al., 2020; Frankenhuys & Weerth, 2013).

Although the two frameworks make opposing predictions in some cases, they share the goal to reveal how adversity influences specific EF abilities (Ellis et al., 2022; Farah et al., 2006; Frankenhuys, Young, et al., 2020; D. Johnson et al., 2021). Knowledge about impaired abilities provides valuable targets for interventions designed to bridge achievement gaps. Conversely, knowledge about enhanced abilities can be leveraged in school or work contexts, for instance, by redesigning learning settings to match people's unique strengths.

Research within both frameworks typically employs the same inferential strategy, by estimating specific EF abilities based on raw performance on EF tasks (e.g., response speed or accuracy). For instance, on the one hand, children who live in less favorable environments tend to be slower and less accurate on inhibition tasks—which has been interpreted as an impaired ability to inhibit distractions (Farah et al., 2006; Fields et al., 2021; Mezzacappa, 2004; Mittal et al., 2015; Noble et al., 2005). On the other hand, some studies report that adolescents and young adults with more exposure to threat and unpredictability might perform better at shifting their attention between different tasks, without sacrificing much performance on each task—which may be a useful adaptation for tracking information in fast changing and dangerous environments (Fields et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2020; Mittal et al., 2015; Nweze et al., 2021; Young et al., 2022). In this paper, we will challenge the inferential strategy of estimating EF abilities based on raw performance. We advocate for cognitive modeling as a viable alternative approach to estimating EF abilities.

Methodological challenges for measuring specific EF abilities

Recent research shows that raw performance on EF tasks does not necessarily capture specific EF abilities, for two related reasons. First, raw performance on EF tasks is also influenced by processes other than the ability of interest, such as response caution and the speed of response execution (Hedge et al., 2021; Ratcliff & McKoon, 2008; Stahl et al., 2014). Thus, slower (or faster) responses in people with more adversity exposure need not reflect EF ability, but could, for instance, reflect a tendency to respond more cautiously (Vermeent et al., 2024). Second, raw performance on EF tasks is also influenced by general processes, such as basic speed of information processing (Frischkorn et al., 2019; Löffler et

al., 2024; Weigard et al., 2021). Thus, lower performance on multiple EF tasks may reflect a difference in a general process, rather than specific EF abilities (Bignardi et al., 2024; Vermeent et al., 2024; Young et al., 2024).

The standard inferential strategy of estimating EF abilities from raw performance limits the effectiveness of interventions. For example, some interventions include training modules for specific EF tasks if performance on a task is below some prespecified cut-off (Distefano et al., 2021). Performance on inhibition tasks in particular is thought to mediate the association between adversity exposure and achievement (Taylor & Barch, 2022). At face value, this would suggest interventions targeting inhibition ability (e.g., inhibition training, which might involve removing distractions from the environment) could positively impact achievement outcomes. However, if impaired inhibition ability is *not* the root cause of performance differences, but rather general processes are (such as the speed of information processing), the impact of such interventions will likely be limited. Therefore, adversity research should move beyond the use of raw performance to better understand the associations between adversity exposures and specific EF abilities.

Separating EF ability from other decision-making processes

Raw performance confounds multiple stages of processing: from initial preparations (e.g., stimulus encoding), to processing task-relevant information, to deciding on and executing a response (Forstmann et al., 2016; Ratcliff, 1978; Wagenmakers, 2009). Individual differences in response times and error rates also depend on how cautiously people make decisions. More cautious people tend to respond more slowly to increase their accuracy, which does not necessarily imply lower ability (Voss et al., 2004). Thus, understanding associations between adversity and specific EF abilities requires isolating ability-relevant processing (e.g., inhibition, attention-shifting) from ability-irrelevant processes that contribute to response times.

Cognitive modeling can distinguish between abilities and ability-irrelevant processes. Here, we focus on the Drift Diffusion Model (DDM; Forstmann et al., 2016; Ratcliff & McKoon, 2008; Ratcliff & Rouder, 1998; Wagenmakers, 2009), which can be applied to many widely used EF tasks. The DDM assumes that people accumulate evidence for one of two responses (e.g., left or right button) until they have acquired sufficient evidence to make a decision (see Figure 3.1). When applied to trial-level response times and accuracy data, the DDM estimates four parameters that represent distinct cognitive processes (Voss et al., 2004). The *drift rate* reflects the rate at which people accumulate evidence for the correct response; thus, it measures the efficiency of information processing. A higher drift rate leads to faster responses and higher accuracy. When applied to EF tasks, the drift rate captures individual differences in specific EF abilities (although drift rate may also capture more general processes, see below; Löffler et al., 2024; Vermeent et al., 2024; Weigard et al., 2021). The *boundary separation* reflects the width between the two decision boundaries; it measures a person's response caution. A higher boundary separation leads to slower responses and higher accuracy. The *non-decision time* reflects a combination of

Adversity is associated with lower general processing speed

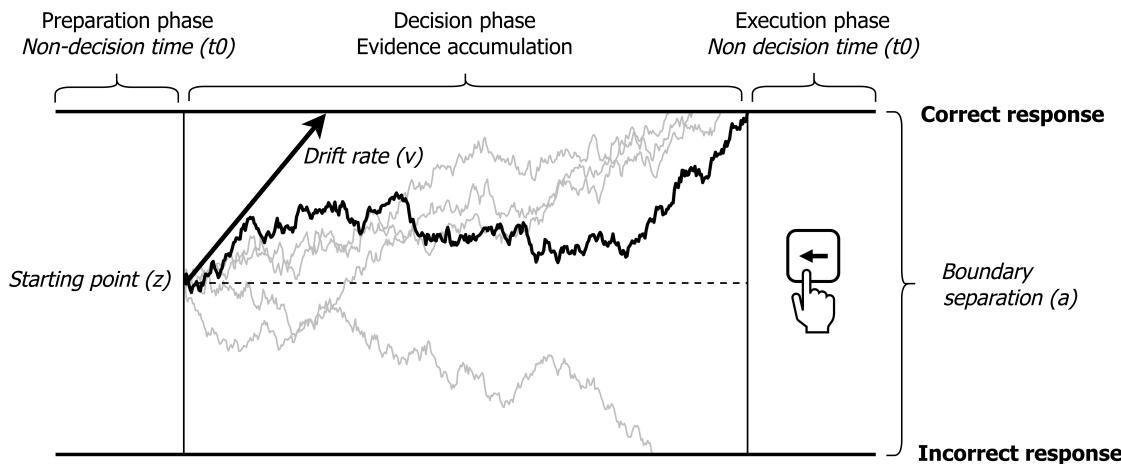


Figure 3.1. Visual representation of the Drift Diffusion Model (DDM). The DDM assumes that people accumulate evidence for one of two responses until they have acquired sufficient evidence to make a decision. Each squiggly line represents the evidence accumulation process on a single trial. The thick, horizontal lines represent the decision boundaries corresponding to the correct response (upper boundary) and the incorrect response (lower boundary). Applying the DDM to trial-level performance data (response times and accuracies) yields four parameters representing distinct cognitive processes: (1) **drift rate**: Average rate of evidence accumulation across trials; measuring the efficiency of information processing. (2) **boundary separation**: The distance between the two decision boundaries; measuring response caution. (3) **Non-decision time**: A combination of the preparation speed (e.g., stimulus encoding) and response execution speed (e.g., time spent pressing the button); measuring speed of non-decision processes. **starting point**: The starting point of the evidence accumulation process; measuring response bias (not considered here). Figure adopted from Vermeent et al. (2024), licensed under CC BY 4.0.

preparation time (e.g., stimulus encoding) as well as execution time (e.g., time spent pressing the button). A larger non-decision time leads to slower responses without a change in accuracy. Finally, the *starting-point* allows for initial bias for one of two responses (e.g., happy or angry faces). In this paper, we will not consider the starting point, because people cannot have biases towards correct or incorrect responses.

Separating EF ability from general processing speed

Recent studies show that a single general factor accounts for most of the variance in drift rates across multiple tasks (Lerche et al., 2020; Löffler et al., 2024; Weigard et al., 2021). This general factor appears to be largely stable across time (Schubert et al., 2016; Weigard et al., 2021). It arises also in analyses of tasks thought to measure different abilities (Schmiedek et al., 2007; Schmitz & Wilhelm, 2016). Even if all tasks are designed to measure the same EF ability (Hedge et al., 2021), variance in the general factor is fully explained by general processing speed instead of any specific EF ability (Löffler et al., 2024). These findings suggest that performance on standard EF tasks largely reflects basic speed of processing, rather than EF abilities.

Recent findings suggest that the effects of adversity are more general than specific. For instance, youth with lower SES and more exposure to adversity show lower task-general raw performance scores across measures of EF, memory, and intelligence, while task-specific performance (after accounting for general variance) is often practically equivalent to zero (Bignardi et al., 2024; Young et al., 2024). In addition, youth with more exposure to household threat showed lower task-general processing speed (based on drift rates), while differences in task-specific drift rates were practically equivalent to zero (Vermeent et al., 2024). These findings suggest that previous research may have overestimated the associations between adversity and specific abilities.

A consequence of both sources of measurement impurity is that estimating specific EF abilities requires latent variable models including two or more measures of the same ability; yet, most studies in adversity research include only one task per EF ability. This makes this work less suitable to investigate whether adversity is associated with specific EF abilities after accounting for general processes. This is important for both deficit-based and adaptation-based interventions, which aim to remediate or leverage impaired or enhanced abilities, respectively. Moreover, while deficit frameworks predict impairments in both specific abilities and general processes (Vermeent et al., 2024), adaptation frameworks predict that specific types of adversity lead to adaptations in specific EF abilities. For example, it has been proposed that unpredictable and dangerous environments may positively affect the ability to rapidly shift attention, promoting the detection of sudden threats and seizing fleeting opportunities (Frankenhuis, Young, et al., 2020; Mittal et al., 2015). In the current research, therefore, we investigate the associations between adversity and two latent EF abilities—*inhibition* and *attention shifting*—after accounting for task-general processing speed. We will use multiple tasks for each ability to obtain better estimates of specific abilities.

The current study

Using a combination of DDM and structural equation modeling, we address three central questions. First, what is the association of adversity exposure in adulthood with general processing speed that is contributing to performance across all cognitive tasks? Second, what is the association of adversity exposure in adulthood with inhibition and attention-shifting abilities after accounting for general processing speed? Third, what is the association of adversity exposure in adulthood with general and/or EF-specific response caution? We focus on two types of adversity: material deprivation (a lack of access to material resources) and threat (the potential for harm imposed by others). In previous research, both types of adversity were associated with performance on tasks used to measure EF (e.g., Fields et al., 2021; Schäfer et al., 2022; Sheridan et al., 2022; Vermeent et al., 2024; Young et al., 2022). In addition, both are central to recent dimensional models of adversity (McLaughlin et al., 2021; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014).

We preregistered predictions of deficit and adaptation frameworks. Deficit frameworks predict negative associations between adversity and both the general speed of pro-

cessing as well as specific abilities. Adaptation frameworks predict intact or enhanced attention shifting ability, but not intact or enhanced inhibition ability. We only interpret intact attention shifting ability as an adaptation if inhibition ability is also lower. Intact performance on both abilities, however, would not provide sufficient evidence of adaptation, as it might instead suggest no association between adversity exposure and these abilities. In line with previous work (Vermeent et al., 2024), we further predict that threat exposure is associated with higher task-general response caution.

3.2 Methods

Participants

We tested a total of 1061 participants from the Dutch Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel (Scherpenzeel, 2011). The LISS panel is an invitation-only, representative sample of the Dutch population consisting of approximately 7,500 individuals across 5,000 households. LISS participants complete a yearly core battery of questionnaires about various domains of life, including one's financial situation over the past year. In addition, LISS participants have the option to participate in further monthly studies on different topics. We estimated power based on Kretzschmar & Gignac (2019). With $\alpha = 0.05$ and assuming moderate reliability of our cognitive measures, we would have $> 90\%$ power to detect small effect sizes ($\beta = 0.1$) with a sample size ranging between $N = 730$ and $N = 980$. Therefore, we aimed for a total sample size of $N = 1,000$.

The current study took place between May and August 2024. Participants were able to complete the cognitive tasks during two or more sessions to increase participation rates. People were eligible for the study if they were between 18 and 55 years old, and had agreed to linking their LISS data to government microdata (not relevant here, but for a different study). We excluded participants who did not have data on any cognitive task. The final sample after exclusions consisted of 1056 participants (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Descriptive statistics for the final sample.

Category	Statistic
Mean age (SD)	39.3 (11.1)
Sex (% Female)	55.7
Highest completed education (%)	
primary school	3
vmbo (intermediate secondary education)	11.9
havo/vwo (higher secondary education)	15.4
mbo (intermediate vocational education)	39.1
hbo (higher vocational education)	36.9
wo (university)	27.9
other	1.6
missing	3.3
Mean number of waves (SD)	
Material deprivation	8.7 (4.9)
Threat	3.5 (2.3)

Adversity measures

We preregistered our approach for computing adversity composite scores based on observed correlations between measures. If all measures of an adversity type (i.e., material deprivation and threat) correlated .60 or higher (indicating “strong” correlations, as was the case for material deprivation in adulthood), we calculated a uniformly weighted average. If one or more correlations were lower than .60 (as was the case for neighborhood threat in adulthood), we applied Principal Component Analysis to the separate measures and extracted only the first principal component score. See section 1 of the supplemental materials for frequency distributions of all adversity measures.

Neighborhood threat in adulthood

Following our preregistration, we measured exposure to neighborhood violence in adulthood using two measures of perceived neighborhood crime, and one measure of crime victimization. Participants completed the Neighborhood Violence Scale (Frankenhuis, Young, et al., 2020; Frankenhuis & Bijlstra, 2018). This scale includes seven items about current perceived neighborhood threat (e.g., “Where I live, it is important to be able to defend yourself against physical harm”), on a scale of 1 (“Completely disagree”) to 7 (“Completely agree”). These items were averaged and standardized. We also included four items on perceived neighborhood threat from the LISS archive (six waves: <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-zch-j8xt>). Participants reported how frequently they: (1) “avoid certain areas in your place of residence because you perceive them as unsafe”, (2) “do not respond to a call at the door because you feel that it is unsafe”, (3) “leave valuable items at home to avoid theft or robbery in the street?”, (4) “make a detour, by car or on foot, to avoid unsafe areas?”. The scale of these four items ranged from 1 (“(Almost) never”), 2 (“Sometimes”), to 3 (“Often”). We intended to include these items again in the current study, but due to an oversight this did not happen. This meant that we did not have data on these items for participants who

never participated in any of the six waves described above (missing N = 348). We decided to conduct all analyses involving threat based only on this subset of the data (N = 708), because *a priori* power remained above 80% (Kretzschmar & Gignac, 2019). We summed the items within each wave, and then calculated an average across waves for which participants had data.

We computed crime victimization in adulthood based on seven items from the LISS archive (six waves: <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-zch-j8xt>) in which participants reported whether or not they had been the victim of seven types of crime in the last two years: (1) burglary or attempted burglary; (2) theft from their car; (3) theft of their wallet or purse, handbag, or other personal possession; (4) wreckage of their car or other private property; (5) intimidation by any other means; (6) maltreatment of such serious nature that it required medical attention; and (7) maltreatment that did not require medical attention. We also included these items again in the current study, with people answering them about the last two years. We computed the total number of distinct crimes that participants were exposed to at any moment in time (a ‘variety score’; Sweeten, 2012).

The correlations between the two measures of perceived neighborhood crime and crime victimization were low (see Table 3.2). Therefore, following our preregistration, we used Principal Component Analysis to extract the first principal component score. This score accounted for 23 % of the variance in the three measures.

Material deprivation in adulthood

We derived measures of material deprivation in adulthood from the LISS archive, using the yearly recurring core study on household and personal income (16 waves: <https://doi.org/10.57990/1gr4-bf42>). First, participants reported how difficult it currently is to live off the income of their household, on a scale from 0 (very hard) to 10 (very easy). Second, participants reported which of the following statements best described their current financial situation: (1) “we are accumulating debt”; (2) “we are somewhat eating into savings”; (3) “we are just managing to make ends meet”; (4) “we have a little bit of money to spare”; (5) “we have a lot of money to spare”. Third, participants reported which of the following applied to their current financial situation (0 = no, 1 = yes): (1) “having trouble making ends meet”; (2) “unable to quickly replace things that break”; (3) “having to lend money for necessary expenditures”; (4) “running behind in paying rent/mortgage or general utilities”; (5) “debt collector/bailiff at the door in the last month”; and (6) “received financial support from family or friends in the last month”. We recoded responses so that higher scores indicated more perceived scarcity.

We first reverse-coded and averaged each measure separately across waves, and then scaled them. As all item correlations were $> .60$ (see Table 3.2), we computed a uniformly weighted average.

Table 3.2. Spearman correlations between the main independent variables and covariates.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Living off income	-											
2. Financial troubles	0.67	-										
3. Current situation	0.73	0.65	-									
4. Perceived scarcity	0.96	0.73	0.79	-								
5. Neighborhood safety	0.20	0.17	0.16	0.17	-							
6. Neighborhood Violence Scale	0.25	0.19	0.23	0.19	0.24	-						
7. Crime victimization	0.11	0.21	0.17	0.29	0.08	0.08	-					
8. Threat	0.29	0.24	0.24	0.27	0.71	0.79	0.30	-				
9. Childhood adversity	0.22	0.14	0.18	0.16	0.14	0.38	0.05	0.32	-			
10. Sex assigned at birth	0.08	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.37	0.03	-0.01	0.21	-0.05	-		
11. Age	-0.05	-0.01	0.03	0.07	-0.04	0.03	0.25	0.01	0.19	-0.02	-	
12. Highest education	-0.23	-0.16	-0.20	-0.23	-0.04	-0.09	0.03	-0.08	-0.12	-0.00	-0.06	-
Mean	4.34	1.32	2.36	2.45	1.59	2.50	0.86	-0.00	-0.00	0.56	0.00	-0.00
SD	1.62	0.59	0.75	0.91	1.58	0.97	1.23	0.71	1.00	0.50	1.00	1.00
Min	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	-1.20	-1.41	0.00	-2.01	-2.42
Max	11.00	5.00	5.00	5.96	8.00	6.57	7.00	3.93	4.23	1.00	1.50	3.18
Skew	0.67	2.72	0.44	0.85	1.20	1.11	1.60	1.25	1.08	-0.23	-0.28	-0.07
Kurtosis	1.05	8.79	0.02	0.84	1.30	1.21	2.30	2.28	0.97	-1.95	-1.05	0.26

Cognitive measures

We programmed six cognitive tasks in jsPsych 7.3 (Leeuw, 2015): two inhibition tasks, three attention shifting tasks, and one basic processing speed task. At the start of the session, participants entered fullscreen mode to avoid distractions from other browser tabs. The tasks were presented against a light-gray background. See Section 2 of the supplemental materials for information on condition manipulation checks, split-half reliability estimates, and bivariate correlations between tasks.

Flanker Task. This task measures inhibition of distractor interference (B. A. Eriksen & Eriksen, 1974). On each trial, participants saw five arrows side-by-side horizontally, pointing either left or right. Their task was to indicate the direction of the central arrow. The arrows were randomly presented 300 pixels above or below the center of the screen. On 50% of the trials, all arrows pointed in the same direction (congruent trials). On the other half, the arrows surrounding the central arrow pointed in the opposite direction (incongruent trials). Participants first completed eight practice trials, followed by two test blocks of 32 trials each, for a total of 64 trials.

Simon Task. This task measures inhibition of prepotent responses (Simon & Wolf, 1963). On each trial, participants saw the word “LEFT” or “RIGHT” (printed in Dutch), presented either on the left or right side of the screen. Their task was to press the ‘A’ key if the word was “LEFT” and the ‘L’ key if the word was “RIGHT”, regardless of the location on the screen. On 50% of the trials, the word matched the location (e.g., the word “LEFT” presented on the left side; congruent trials). On the other half, the word did not match the location (e.g., the word “LEFT” presented on the right side; incongruent trials). Participants first completed eight practice trials, followed by two test blocks of 32 trials each, for a total of 64 trials.

Color-shape Task. This task measures the ability to shift attention between different tasks (Miyake et al., 2000). On each trial, participants saw a square or a circle in the center of the screen. This square or circle was either blue or yellow. Depending on the task rule printed above the stimulus, their task was to classify the stimulus based on its shape or color. On 50% of the trials, the rule was the same as on the preceding trial (repeat trials). On the other half, the rule was different than on the preceding trial (switch trials). The same stimulus was never presented more than twice in a row, and there were never more than three repeat or switch trials in a row. Participants first completed eight practice trials, followed by two test blocks of 32 trials each, for a total of 64 trials.

Animacy-size Task. This task measures the ability to shift attention between tasks (Arrington & Logan, 2004). On each trial, participants saw a single noun (in Dutch) referring to an animal or object (adopted from Braem, 2017). Depending on the task rule presented on the screen, their task was to classify the noun based on whether it referred to a living or non-living thing (e.g., wasp vs. piano), or whether it referred to something that was smaller

or larger than a soccer ball (e.g., ring vs. dolphin). On 50% of the trials, the rule was the same as on the preceding trial (repeat trials). On the other half, the rule was different than on the preceding trial (switch trials). There were never more than three repeat or switch trials in a row. Participants first completed eight practice trials, followed by two test blocks of 32 trials each, for a total of 64 trials.

Global-local Task. This task measures the ability to shift attention between tasks. We adapted the stimuli from Huizinga et al. (2010). On each trial, participants saw a large square or rectangle composed of 16 small squares or rectangles. The stimulus was flanked on both side by a drawing of an elephant or mouse, which was presented 1,000 ms prior to the appearance of the stimulus. If the stimulus was flanked by the image of an elephant (50% of trials), participants had to indicate whether the global image was a square or rectangle. If the stimulus was flanked by the image of a mouse (50% of trials), participants had to indicate whether the local images were squares or rectangles. On 50 % of the trials, the rule was the same as on the preceding trial (repeat trials). On the other half, the rule was different than on the preceding trial (switch trials). Finally, the stimuli were congruent on 50% of the trials (e.g., large square consisting of small squares) and incongruent on the other half (e.g., large square consisting of small rectangles). Congruency, task rule (switch vs. repeat), or focus (global vs. local) where never repeated more than three times in a row. Participants first completed eight practice trials, followed by two test blocks of 32 trials each, for a total of 64 trials.

Posner Task. This task measures basic speed of processing (Posner & Mitchell, 1967). On each trial, participants saw two letters in the center of the screen, drawn from the set A, B, F, H, Q, a, b, f, h, and q. Their task was to indicate whether the letters were the same (e.g., "AA", "bB") or different (e.g., "AQ", "Fh"). On 50% of the trials, the letters were the same, and on the other half they were different. Participants first completed eight practice trials, followed by two test blocks of 40 trials each, for a total of 80 trials.

State anxiety

Participants reported their state anxiety after each cognitive task; thus, six times in total. We measured state anxiety using the shortened version of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Bij et al., 2003; Marteau & Bekker, 1992), which asks participants how calm, tense, upset, relaxed, content, and worried they currently feel, on a scale of 1 ("not at all") to 4 ("very much"). We recoded (if necessary) and then summed the answers with higher scores reflecting more state anxiety.

Environmental noise

Participants reported the level of environmental noise after each cognitive task; thus, six times in total. We measured environmental noise using a single item, rated on a scale of 1 to 5: "How much noise was there in your environment during the game?"

Confounds

We used Directed Acyclic Graphs to identify potential confounds of the key estimands, which were the associations between self-reported threat and material deprivation in adulthood with cognitive outcomes. A Directed Acyclic Graph is a visual overview of assumptions about how variables are causally related. They are graphs consisting of nodes (variables) and directed arrows (causal pathways). An arrow between two variables represents the assumption that experimentally manipulating the variable at the origin of the arrow will change the variable at the end of the arrow (but not the other way around). Directed Acyclic Graphs aid in the identification of variables that need to be adjusted for in the statistical models (i.e., confounders with arrows to both the main predictor and the outcome), and, equally importantly, which variables should not be adjusted for (i.e., colliders and mediators). For a detailed explanation, see Rohrer (2018).

The set of potential confounders consisted of (1) age (Salthouse, 2016, 2019; Starns & Ratcliff, 2010); (2) education (Hofmarcher, 2021); (3) sex (Ning et al., 2023); (4) childhood adversity exposure (material deprivation and threat combined) (Bos et al., 2009; Goodman et al., 2019); and (5) potential causal relations between recent material deprivation and recent threat (Bywaters et al., 2016; Lacey et al., 2022; Ning et al., 2023). We made these decisions based on previous literature, or, in cases of doubt, by statistically testing support for specific relations using data from a previous LISS study (Vermeent et al., 2025). Specifically, following our preregistration, we used the *dagitty* R package (Ankan et al., 2021; Textor et al., 2016) to test whether independencies between specific variables implied by the Directed Acyclic Graph (conditional on the other causal pathways) were supported by these data (see the preregistration for more details).

Figure 3.2 depicts the final preregistered Directed Acyclic Graph for material deprivation and threat exposure in adulthood. For threat exposure in adulthood, our statistical model controlled for age, sex, childhood adversity, and recent material deprivation. We included material deprivation in adulthood based on studies showing that material deprivation tends to precede exposure to adversities such as threat (Bywaters et al., 2016; Lacey et al., 2022; Ning et al., 2023). We did not control for education given a lack of theoretical and statistical support for this effect (see preregistration). To explore the effect of our assumption that material deprivation tends to precede threat, we also present a secondary model excluding material deprivation in adulthood as a confound. As preregistered, we will not base our main conclusions on this secondary model.

For material deprivation in adulthood, our primary statistical model controlled for age, education, sex, and childhood adversity exposure based on previous studies (see above). We did not control for threat exposure in adulthood, as, following the Directed Acyclic Graph, we assume that threat exposure mediates the effect of recent material deprivation on cognitive processes. If true, including threat exposure in the model would make the association between material deprivation and cognitive processes an indirect

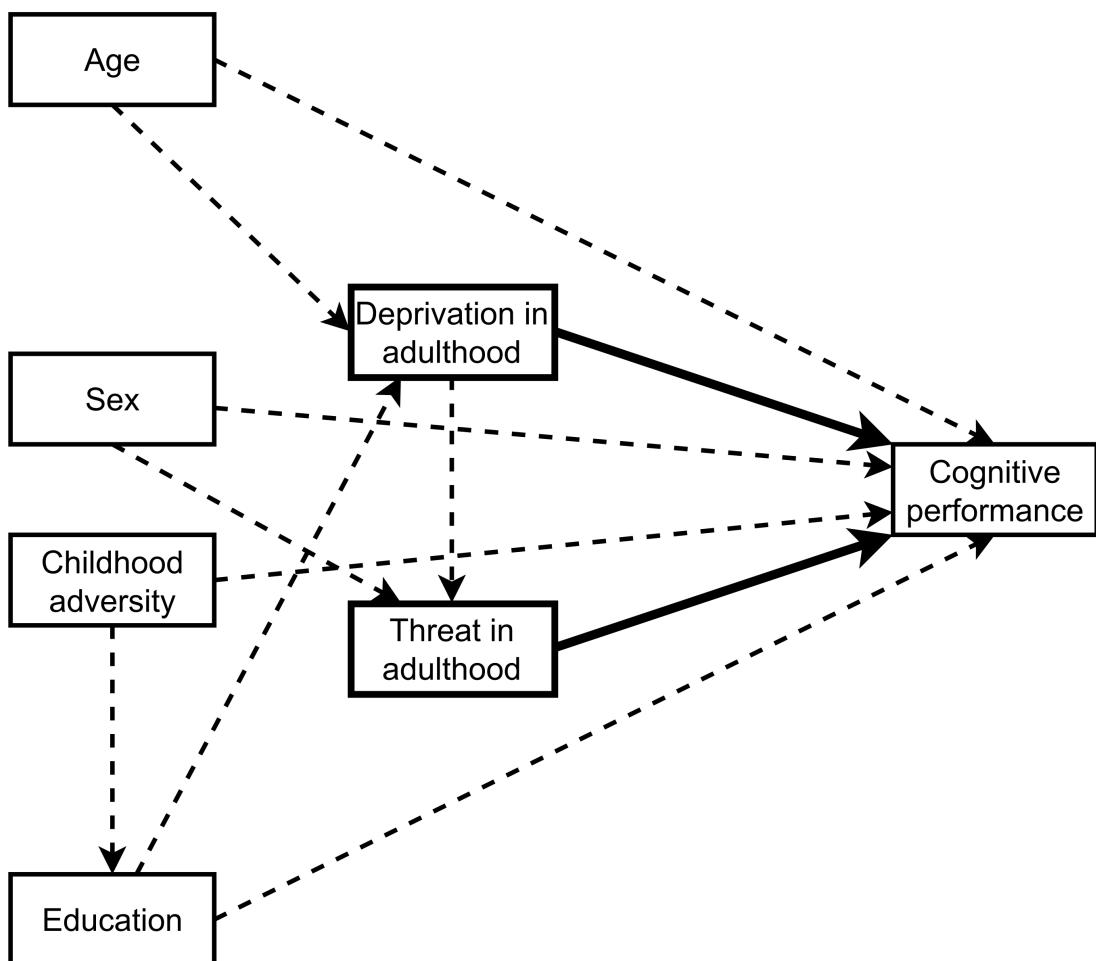


Figure 3.2. Direct Acyclic Graphs (DAG) depicting our causal assumptions about the main estimands. the rectangles (nodes) depict variables, and directed arrows depict assumed causal pathways. An arrow between two variables represents the assumption that experimentally manipulating the variable at the origin of the arrow will change the variable at the end of the arrow (but not the other way around). The statistical models control for confounding variables (depicted as dashed paths), which have an arrow both to the independent variable and the dependent variable.

effect, rather than a total effect (which was our estimand). To explore the effect of our assumption that threat mediates the effect of material deprivation on cognitive processes, we also present a secondary model that includes threat in adulthood as a confound. As preregistered, we will not base our main conclusions on this secondary model.

Procedure

We obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social & Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University (FETC20-490) and the Ethics committee for research in the Sciences and Life Sciences of the University of Amsterdam (FNWI-41_2023). The study was implemented on the LISS platform, and participants could only complete the study on a laptop or desktop PC. Participants started with the six cognitive tasks, in

randomized order. After each task, they indicated their state anxiety and the level of environmental noise. Then, participants had the option to either continue to the next task or complete the other tasks at a later point in time. 86 % of participants completed all tasks in a single session, and 14 % of participants took two or more sessions. Jointly, the cognitive tasks took around 25 minutes to complete. After finishing all cognitive tasks, participants completed questionnaires about neighborhood threat and material deprivation during childhood and, adulthood exposure to crime victimization in the past two years. They also completed questionnaires on impulsivity, self-control, and future orientation, which are not considered here because they fall outside of the scope of the present study. As some participants had already completed all of these questionnaires in a different data collection (about six months prior to the current study), we only presented the questionnaires to new participants. Finally, all participants answered a few standard LISS evaluation questions about the study, giving them an opportunity to provide written feedback.

Analysis plan

Data cleaning

For all tasks, we first removed any response times > 10 seconds. This step was not preregistered but was necessary given that we did not specify a response time-out. Consequently, a small portion of response times lasted up to several minutes, likely reflecting breaks or interruptions (between 0.02 % and 0.25 % for all tasks). We removed these first to prevent them from biasing our preregistered exclusion of outliers. Next, we applied two preregistered exclusion criteria. First, we removed trials with response times < 250 ms and trials with response times more than 3.2 SD above the intra-individual log-transformed mean response time. Second, if participants performed at chance level on a particular task, we excluded the data for that task only. We set the cut-off for chance performance based on accuracy at the 97.5 % tail of the binomial distribution one would obtain if guessing.

DDM estimation

We used a Hierarchical Bayesian implementation of the DDM (Vandekerckhove et al., 2011; Wiecki et al., 2013) to leverage group-level information for individual parameter estimation. We applied this model to each task separately. For the Posner Task, we estimated a single drift rate, boundary separation, and non-decision time for each participant. For the other five tasks, we estimated drift rates, boundary separation, and non-decision times separately for congruent (repeat) and incongruent (switch) trials.

The DDM models were fit using the *runjags* package (Denwood, 2016). We fit each model with three Markov Chain Monte Carlo chains. We used 2,000 burn-in samples and 10,000 additional samples, retaining every 10th sample, resulting in a total of 3,000 posterior samples. Model convergence and fit was good across all DDM models (see section 3 of the supplemental materials).

We accounted for two potential sources of measurement error in the DDM estimates: (1) the level of environmental noise and (2) within-participant differences from mean

state anxiety between the tasks (see above). We used linear regression to residualize the variance of noise and anxiety out of all the drift diffusion estimates. See Section 4 of the supplemental materials for more information.

Structural equation modeling

We constructed the full structural equation model sequentially. First, we optimized the fit of the drift rate, boundary separation, and non-decision time sub-models. Second, we combined these three models into a single measurement model. Third, we added the regression paths between measures of adversity in adulthood and the latent factors. To assess goodness-of-fit, we used the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the comparative fit index (CFI). CFI values > 0.90 (> 0.95) and RMSEA values < 0.08 (≤ 0.06) were interpreted as acceptable (good) fit.

Each DDM parameter sub-model was a bi-factor model including the parameter estimates of all tasks as manifest variables. We estimated a general factor accounting for variance in all manifest variables. A second ability-specific inhibition factor loaded on the parameter estimates of incongruent trials of the Flanker and Simon tasks. A third specific attention shifting factor loaded on the parameter estimates of switch trials of the Color-shape, Global-local, and Animacy-size tasks. These two factors were allowed to covary. We also estimated covariances between the conditions of each task. For each sub-model, we compared the fit of this initial model to a version with a common EF factor loading on incongruent/switch trials of all tasks. We deemed the second model a better fit when we observed a significant chi squared change test and an AIC value difference > 10 .

For the drift rate model, we interpreted the general factor as basic speed of processing, and the ability-specific factors as reflecting inhibition and attention-shifting ability (or common EF in the case of the second model). For the boundary separation and non-decision time models, we interpreted the general factor as general response caution/speed of non-decision processes, and the ability-specific factors as reflecting response caution/speed of non-decision processes specific to conflict trials.

After optimizing each sub-model, we combined them into a joint measurement model. We allowed the general latent factors (processing speed, general caution, and general non-decision time) to covary, as well as the ability-specific latent factors (separately for inhibition and attention shifting, unless a common factor was favored).

Finally, we constructed two versions of the final model, one to estimate the association between material deprivation in adulthood and the outcome measures, and one to estimate the association between threat exposure in adulthood and the outcome measures. In both models, we regressed the adversity measure on each latent factor, together with the control variables (see the section on confounds for more details). We report indirect effects of control variables in the supplemental materials (section 5).

Inferential criteria

We tested for three types of associations between different types of adversity with EF ability and processing speed (as indexed by drift rates): enhancements, impairments, or practical equivalence. We defined enhancements as a positive association between adversity and drift rates. We defined impairments as a negative association between adversity and drift rate. We defined practical equivalence as standardized regression coefficients that significantly fell between -0.10 and 0.10 . We tested this using the Two One-Sided T-tests procedure (Lakens et al., 2018). This test evaluates whether the obtained effect is significantly larger than the lower bound *and* significantly smaller than the upper bound. Thus, it affords conclusions about practical equivalence based on significant p -values, rather than (invalidly) inferring the absence of an effect on the basis of non-significant results.

Transparency and openness

We have reported how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, and all measures in the study. The preregistration, analysis code, and study materials, can be found on the article's GitHub repository (https://github.com/stefanvermeent/liss_ef_2024). The newly collected data will be available for other researchers in the LISS data archive, after signing a data use agreement (<https://lissdata.nl>). For more information on the LISS variables used, see the article's GitHub repository (https://github.com/stefanvermeent/liss_ef_2024). Our study complies with Level 2 of the Transparency and Openness Promotion (TOP) guidelines.

3.3 Results

Structural equation model fit

As preregistered, we started with optimizing fit in structural equation models for each DDM parameter separately before combining them all into a single model. For drift rates, we selected the model containing a general processing speed factor (loading on all drift rates) and a common EF factor (loading only on drift rates of incongruent and switch conditions). An alternative model with a separate inhibition and attention shifting factor did not converge. The model with a common EF factor provided a good fit to the data (CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04 [0.03, 0.05]). However, the loadings of the common EF factor were small and in opposing directions, and the latent factor's residual variance was non-significant. Therefore, we did not estimate associations between adversity and common EF.

For both boundary separation and non-decision time, we selected a model containing only a general factor (loading on all boundary separations/non-decision times), which provided a good fit to the data (boundary separation: CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.05 [0.04, 0.06]; non-decision time: CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04 [0.03, 0.05]). The two preregistered models specifying additional latent factors loading only on switching/incongruent conditions did not converge.

The final model combining all three DDM parameters provided a good fit, although it required the addition of covariances between residual variances of manifest DDM parameters of the same task (reflecting shared method variance), CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.04 [0.04, 0.05]. See Figure 3.3 for a visualization and Table 3.3 for fit statistics of all models.

Table 3.3. Fit statistics of all preregistered structural equation models.

Model	Chi square	Robust CFI	Robust RMSEA
Measurement models			
Drift rate model 1		Model did not converge	
Drift rate model 1	125.42 (45), p < .001	0.98	0.04 [0.03, 0.05]
Boundary separation model 1		Model did not converge	
Boundary separation model 2		Model did not converge	
Boundary separation model 1	165.37 (50), p < .001	0.98	0.05 [0.04, 0.06]
Non-decision time model 1		Model did not converge	
Non-decision time model 2		Model did not converge	
Non-decision time model 3	120.05 (50), p < .001	0.98	0.04 [0.03, 0.05]
Full measurement model	1249.81 (445), p < .001	0.96	0.04 [0.04, 0.05]
Structural models			
Primary deprivation model	1564.34 (599), p < .001	0.95	0.04 [0.04, 0.04]
Secondary deprivation model	1625.91 (661), p < .001	0.96	0.04 [0.04, 0.04]
Primary threat model	1309.71 (599), p < .001	0.95	0.04 [0.04, 0.04]
Secondary threat model	1361.94 (602), p < .001	0.95	0.04 [0.04, 0.05]

Note: for each DDM parameter, measurement model 1 contained a task-general latent factor as well as separate latent factors for inhibition and shifting. Measurement model 2 contained a task-general latent factor as well as a common EF factor. Measurement model 3 contained only a task-general latent factor.

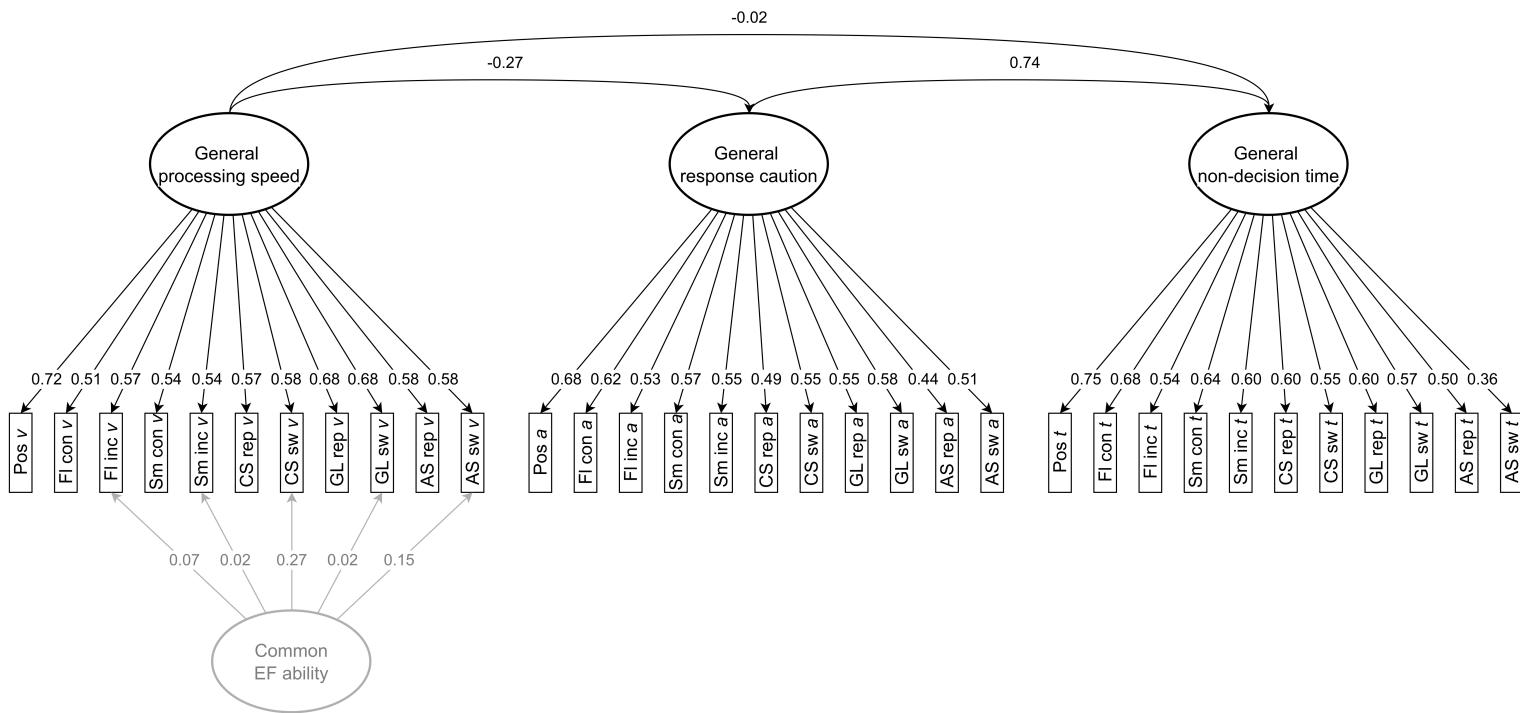


Figure 3.3. Final measurement model of the Drift Diffusion parameters. Rectangles depict manifest parameter estimates, elipses depict latent factors, unidirectional arrows depict factor loadings, and bidirectional arrows depict correlations. Latent factors with non-significant residual variances are greyed out. a = manifest boundary separation, AS = Attention-shifting task, CS = Color-shape task, GL = Global-local task, Fl = Flanker task, Sm = Simon task, t = manifest non-decision time, v = manifest drift rate.

Preregistered analyses

Our primary analyses examined the association of exposure to material deprivation and threat in adulthood with task-general processing speed, task-general response caution, and task-general speed of stimulus encoding and/or response execution. As the structural equation model analyses reported above showed that EF-specific factors had non-significant variances, we retained them in the model but did not include them as dependent variables in subsequent analyses.

Material deprivation in adulthood

Exposure to material deprivation in adulthood was not associated with either general processing speed ($\beta = -0.08, p = .063$), task-general response caution ($\beta = 0.06, p = .155$), or task-general non-decision time ($\beta = 0.05, p = .153$) (see Figure 3.4). In addition, none of the effects fell within the region of practical equivalence (all $ps \geq .092$). The effects in the secondary model (including exposure to threat in adulthood as a confounder) were comparable.

Threat in adulthood

Exposure to threat in adulthood was negatively associated with task-general processing speed ($\beta = -0.10, p = .036$) (see Figure 3.4). People who reported more exposure to threat in adulthood processed information more slowly across tasks. Exposure to threat in adulthood was not associated with task-general response caution ($\beta = 0.04, p = .355$), or task-general non-decision time ($\beta = -0.04, p = .333$). The effects in the secondary model (excluding material deprivation in adulthood as a confounder) were comparable, although the association with task-general non-decision time was practically equivalent in the secondary model.

Non-preregistered analyses

Associations with childhood adversity

In the first set of non-preregistered analyses, we analyzed how childhood exposure to threat and material deprivation are associated with task-general and ability-specific cognitive processes. The rational for these analyses is that we observed significant indirect associations between childhood adversity and general speed of processing in our preregistered analyses. Here, we analyzed *direct* effects of childhood threat and material deprivation (i.e., without including exposure to adversity in adulthood). We controlled for sex (but not age and education) and in the case of threat we also controlled for material deprivation, but not the other way around (similarly to the preregistered analyses).

Childhood exposure to material deprivation was negatively associated with general processing speed, $\beta = -0.24, SE = 0.04, 95\% CI = [-0.31, -0.17], p < .001$ (Figure 3.5). People who reported higher levels of childhood exposure to material deprivation processed information more slowly across tasks. In addition, childhood exposure to material deprivation was positively associated with non-decision time, $\beta = 0.1, SE = 0.04, 95\% CI = [0.02, 0.18], p = .015$. People who reported higher levels of childhood exposure to mater-

Adversity is associated with lower general processing speed

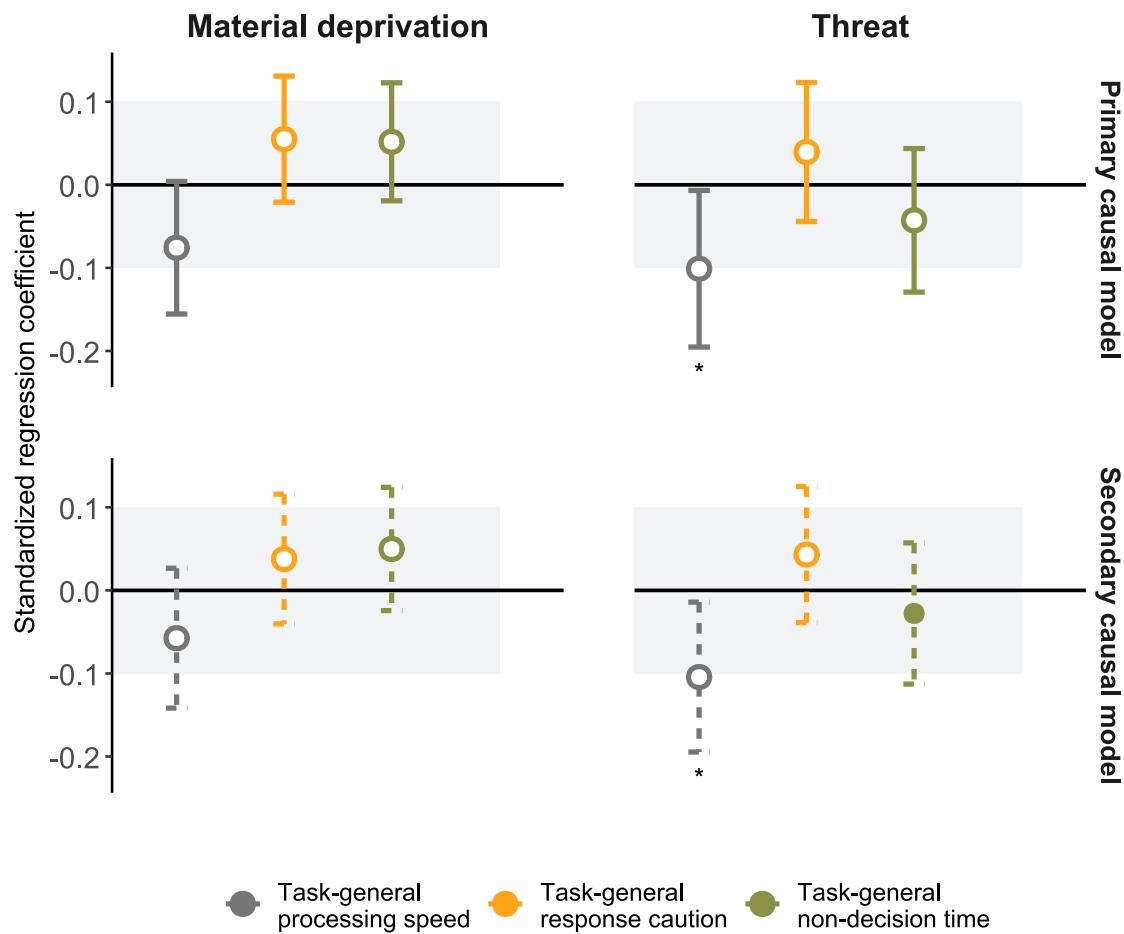


Figure 3.4. Standardized (preregistered) associations between exposure to adversity in adulthood with task-general processing speed, response caution, and non-decision time. The left panel depicts effects of material deprivation and the right panel depicts effects of threat. The top row depicts effects of the primary statistical model (following from our main Directed Acyclic Graph), and the bottom row depicts effects of the secondary statistical model (see Figure 3.2). For material deprivation in adulthood, the primary statistical model included age, education, and childhood adversity as confounders, whereas the secondary model additionally included threat in adulthood as a confounder. For threat in adulthood, the primary statistical model included age, childhood adversity, and material deprivation in adulthood, whereas the secondary statistical model did not include material deprivation in adulthood as a confounder. The gray area reflects the pre-registered area of practical equivalence. Effects depicted with a solid point are practically equivalent, and effects depicted with a hollow point are not practically equivalent. Standard errors represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance (tested against zero) is indicated with asterisks; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

ial deprivation took more time to encode stimulus information and/or execute responses across tasks. Childhood exposure to material deprivation was not associated with general response caution. Equivalence tests revealed that none of these associations fell within the region of practical equivalence.

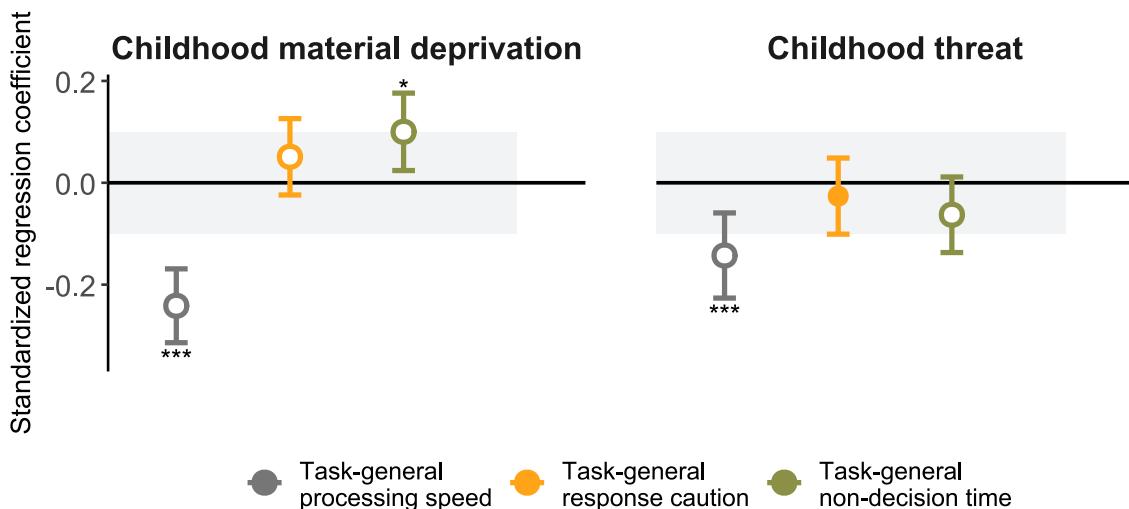


Figure 3.5. Standardized (non-preregistered) associations between childhood exposure to adversity with task-general processing speed, response caution, and non-decision time. The left panel depicts effects of material deprivation and the right panel depicts effects of threat. The gray area reflects the preregistered area of practical equivalence. Effects depicted with a solid point are practically equivalent, and effects depicted with a hollow point are not practically equivalent. Standard errors represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance (tested against zero) is indicated with asterisks; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

For childhood exposure to threat, we found a significant negative association with general processing speed, $\beta = -0.14$, SE = 0.04, 95% CI = [-0.23, -0.06], $p < .001$. People who reported higher levels of childhood exposure to threat processed information more slowly across tasks. We did not find significant associations between childhood exposure to threat and general response caution or general non-decision time. Of these associations, equivalence tests revealed that the association with general response caution fell within the region of practical equivalence ($p = .026$).

Associations with task-specific drift rates

In the second set of non-preregistered analyses, we analyzed how adversity exposure during childhood and adulthood were associated with task-specific residual variances. The rationale for these analyses was that while we did not find coherent latent EF factors, all tasks showed significant residual variance after accounting for general speed of processing. This implies that, after accounting for general speed of processing, performance is further determined by unique features of individual tasks (i.e., method variance), which may be associated with adversity exposure. For this analysis, we were mostly interested in investigating the extent to which task-specific effects reflect EF abilities or task-specific processing, and therefore only focused on drift rates.

We first attempted to fit a model in which all task-specific drift rates were allowed to covary (i.e., across inhibition and attention-shifting tasks). However, this model did not converge. A model that only estimated covariances between task-specific drift rates of in-

hibition tasks and attention shifting tasks separately provided a good fit to the data ($CFI = 0.99$, $RMSEA = 0.03 [0.02, 0.04]$). This suggests that task-specific drift rates correlated among inhibition tasks and among attention-shifting tasks, but not between inhibition and attention-shifting tasks.

Figure 3.6 shows latent correlations between task-specific drift rates after accounting for task-general processing speed. The drift rates of repeat and switch conditions within each attention shifting task correlated moderately to strongly, while all correlations between tasks were low. This suggests that task-specific drift rates of attention shifting tasks captured features of the tasks that were not shared between tasks. In contrast, all correlations between task-specific drift rates of inhibition tasks were low, even among drift rates of the same task. Thus, task-specific drift rate did provide consistent measures of specific EF abilities that are shared across tasks.

Next, we explored the associations of task-specific drift rates with exposure to material deprivation and threat in both childhood and adulthood, after accounting for task-general processing speed (Figure 3.7). Exposure to material deprivation in adulthood was not associated with task-specific drift rates of any of the tasks. Exposure to threat in adulthood was negatively associated all task-specific drift rates in both the repeat and switch condition of the Color-shape task (repeat: $\beta = -0.14$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI = $[-0.23, -0.05]$, $p = .025$; switch: $\beta = -0.13$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI = $[-0.22, -0.04]$, $p = .025$). None of the other associations were significant.

Childhood exposure to material deprivation was negatively associated with all task-specific drift rates, with effect sizes ranging from $\beta = -0.08$ for the congruent condition of the Simon Task to $\beta = -0.27$ for the incongruent condition of the Global-local Task. Childhood exposure to threat was negatively associated with all but the task-specific drift rates of the congruent condition of the Flanker and the Simon task. The effect sizes of significant effects ranged from $\beta = -0.06$ for the incongruent condition of the Simon Task to $\beta = -0.16$ for the switch condition of the Posner Task.

To summarize, we did not find evidence that exposure to threat or material deprivation (either in childhood or adulthood) was associated to specific inhibition or attention-shifting ability. Rather, we mostly found associations with task-general processes. We did find associations between childhood adversity and task-specific drift rates. However, correlations among task-specific drift rates were low, even for tasks thought to measure the same EF ability, suggesting that they reflect method variance rather than specific EF abilities.

3.4 Discussion

We investigated associations between exposure to two types of adversity in adulthood—material deprivation and threat—with inhibition and attention shifting ability. Partic-

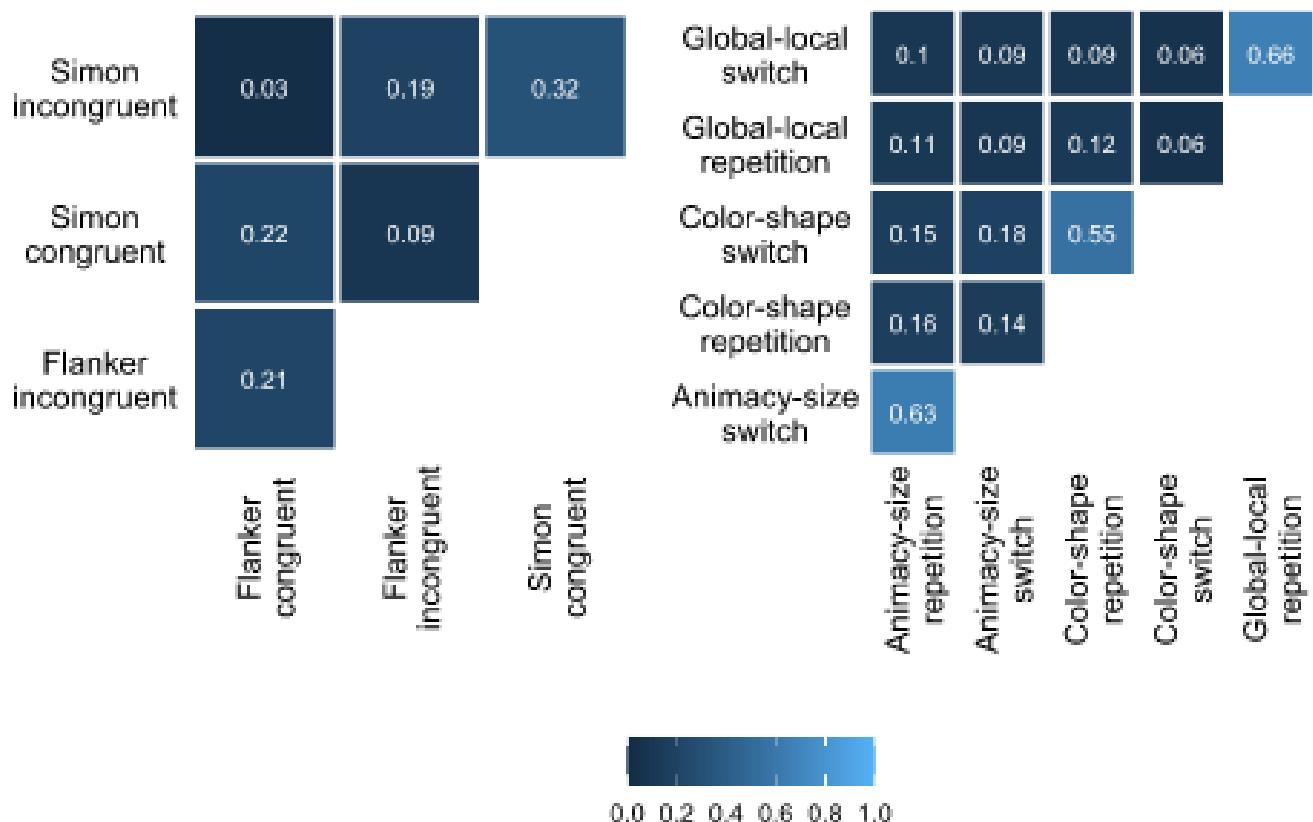


Figure 3.6. Correlations between task-specific drift rates after accounting for task-general processing speed.

ipants completed two inhibition tasks, three attention shifting tasks, and one basic processing speed task. First, we used DDM to separate raw performance into three distinct cognitive processes: (1) speed of evidence accumulation (drift rate), (2) response caution (boundary separation), and (3) speed of stimulus encoding and response execution (non-decision time). Finally, we used structural equation modeling to separate variance in each cognitive process into a task-general factor (shared across all tasks) and ability-specific factors.

Main findings

People with more exposure to threat in adulthood—but not material deprivation—showed lower general processing speed. This is consistent with predictions from deficit frameworks (Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014; Tucker-Drob, 2013). After accounting for general processing speed, there was no remaining variance that could be attributed to either inhibition ability or attention shifting ability. Additionally, the associations between ma-

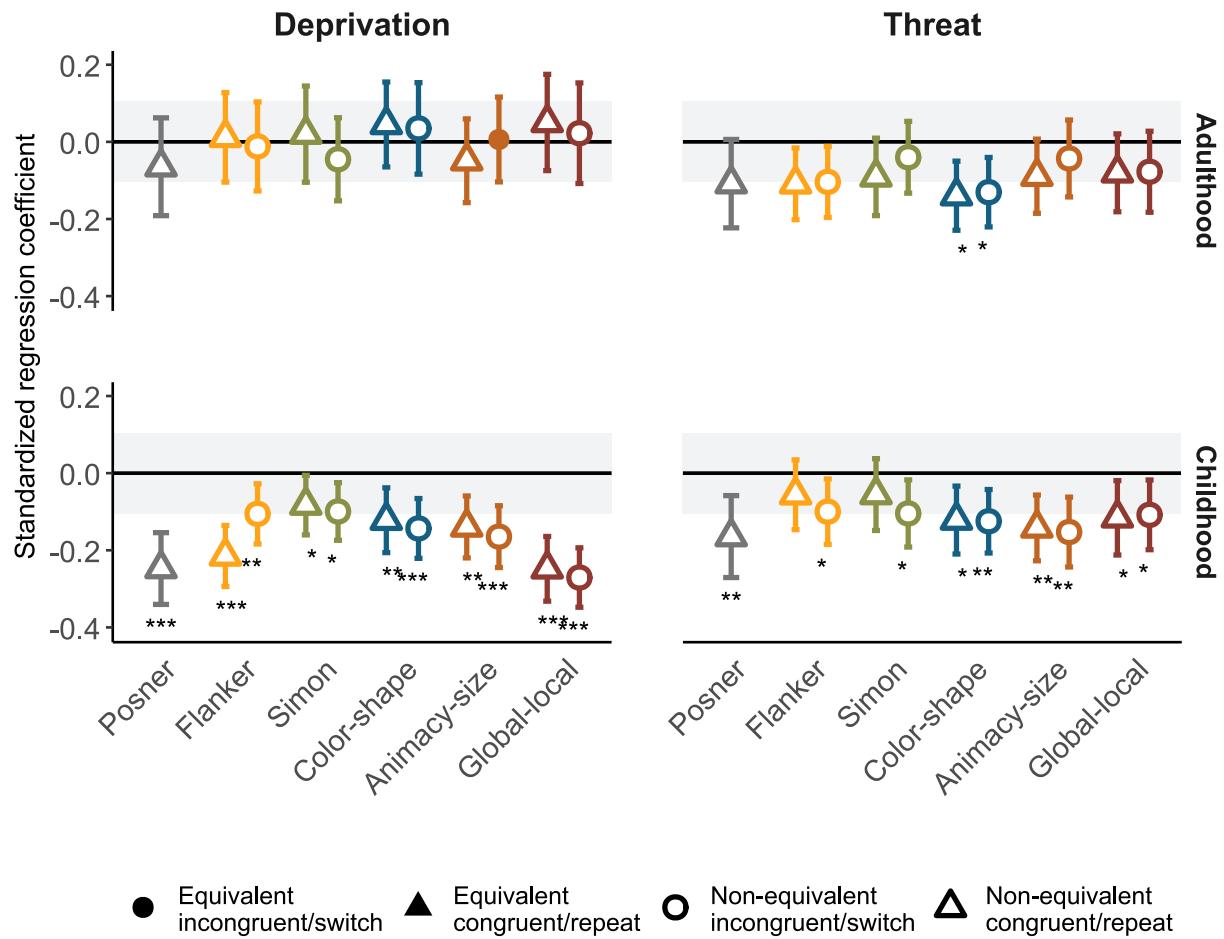


Figure 3.7. Standardized (non-preregistered) associations between adversity and task-specific drift rates. The effects are split out over adversity type (columns) and timing of adversity (rows). The gray area reflects the area of practical equivalence. Triangles depict effects for repeat/congruent conditions, and circles reflect effects for switch/incongruent conditions. Effects depicted with a solid point are practically equivalent, and effects depicted with a hollow point are not practically equivalent. Standard errors represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance (tested against zero) is indicated with asterisks; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

terial deprivation and threat in adulthood with both response caution and non-decision time were neither significantly different from zero, nor practically equivalent to zero. In other words, from these data, we were neither able to conclude that people with more exposure to adversity differed in their level of response caution and non-decision time, nor that these processes were similar to people with lower levels of adversity exposure.

We found that variance in EF task performance was mostly explained by a task-general factor, not by ability-specific factors. This finding aligns with previous research applying DDM to EF tasks. Three recent studies converged on the similar conclusion that performance across different EF tasks is best explained by a task-general drift rate factor

(Frischkorn et al., 2019; Hedge et al., 2021; Löffler et al., 2024; Weigard et al., 2021). One study found that the task-general drift rate factor fully reflected basic processing speed, rather than common EF processes (Löffler et al., 2024). Similarly, another study including several inhibition tasks found that shared variance was mostly explained by basic processing speed and strategy differences, not by inhibition ability (Hedge et al., 2021). It is therefore not surprising that we were unable to estimate ability-specific EF factors after accounting for general processing. These issues tie into several other criticisms of common EF tasks in the cognitive psychology literature—such as low test-retest reliability—which should be considered when using these tasks to test associations with adversity (Bastian et al., 2020).

Our results also align with research showing that associations between adversity and raw performance (e.g., response times, accuracy) on EF tasks are mostly task-general. For instance, across three large cohorts, youth from more disadvantaged backgrounds had lower task-general raw performance across a wide range of cognitive tasks. After controlling for task-general effects, performance on specific intelligence tasks was largely practically equivalent to zero, and performance on some specific EF tasks even appeared enhanced (Bignardi et al., 2024). Finally, previous research applying DDM in the context of adversity found similar (but not identical) results as reported here. Youth with more exposure to threat (but not material deprivation) had slower general processing speed across three EF tasks and a basic processing speed task, while most specific abilities remained intact (Vermeent et al., 2024). In contrast to the findings reported here, these youth also showed more response caution. It is important to highlight that both studies measured specific EF abilities with only a single task. This makes it unclear to which extent the task-specific effects they observed reflected EF abilities (see also our non-preregistered findings discussed below).

Non-preregistered findings

Additional non-preregistered analyses showed that childhood exposure to both material deprivation and threat were associated with slower general processing speed. The effect sizes of these associations were larger than those of recent adversity exposure. This finding is striking considering the average age in our sample was 39 years. This is consistent with previous literature suggesting that adverse experiences early in life have a lasting effect on brain development (Nelson et al., 2020; Nelson & Gabard-Durnam, 2020; Shonkoff et al., 2012). For instance, both experiences of malnutrition and exposure to stress (e.g., as a result of threat) have been linked to structural changes in brain networks involved in cognitive functioning (Algarin et al., 2017; Polavarapu & Hasbani, 2017; Rebello et al., 2018).

A second important non-preregistered finding is that after controlling for task-general processing, adversity exposure was negatively associated with several task-specific drift rates, mostly relating to childhood exposure to threat and deprivation. Importantly, the correlations among task-specific drift rates were all small—with the exception of cor-

relations among switch and repeat conditions of the same attention shifting tasks. This suggests that these negative associations should not be interpreted as lower ability-specific processing, relating to inhibition and attention shifting ability. Instead, it appears to relate to information processing that is much more specific to individual tasks. This is consistent with literature showing that a substantial part of the variance in performance on cognitive task consists of method variance resulting from the nature of the task itself, rather than what the task is designed to measure (Barkley, 2012; Rey-Mermet, 2024; Schubert et al., 2016).

Implications for adversity research and interventions

Our results have two implications for adversity research and interventions, both of which warrant caution against interpreting raw performance on individual EF tasks. First, adversity appears to be associated mostly with task-general processes, rather than specific abilities. This contrasts with common inferences in both the deficit and adaptation literature, which tend to explain performance differences in terms of specific EF abilities, such as inhibition (Farah et al., 2006; Fields et al., 2021; Mezzacappa, 2004; Mittal et al., 2015; Noble et al., 2005) and attention shifting (Fields et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2020; Mittal et al., 2015; Nweze et al., 2021; Young et al., 2022). Moreover, our results show that accounting for task-general processing does not guarantees that task-specific associations with adversity reflect differences in EF. Instead, negative associations with adversity appear to be partly driven by specific features of individual tasks. A general recommendation for adversity research is therefore that studies should include (1) multiple EF tasks to quantify task-general processing speed, and (2) ideally two or more tasks measuring the same EF ability to quantify ability-specific processing. DDM and SEM can then be used to account for task-general and task-specific processes. For interventions, our results imply that individual EF tasks, or batteries of EF tasks each of which measures a different ability, have limited value as screening tools; and, that training performance on such tasks is unlikely to transfer to broader, sustainable changes in EF abilities.

Our findings complicate research that aims to understand how EF abilities develop in adverse environments. We agree with others that results like ours do not necessarily mean that EF abilities do not exist (e.g., Löffler et al., 2024), or that adversity is not associated with differences in EF. Rather, it points to issues with how we *measure* EF abilities. It is difficult to provide a straightforward solution for this problem, which is still a much-debated topic in cognitive psychology (Bastian et al., 2020). Part of the solution may lie in adjusting the content of EF tasks, for instance, by using real-world content rather than abstract content (Young et al., 2022). By increasing familiarity, relevance, and/or valence, such content might increase the engagement of EF abilities (Niebaum & Munakata, 2023). Another solution could be to use adaptive testing procedures, which appear to improve estimation of EF abilities (Draheim et al., 2021). However, more fundamental changes might be necessary as well, such as developing new paradigms that align more closely to people's everyday experiences, goals, and challenges (Doebel, 2020; Miller-Cotto et al., 2022; Niebaum & Munakata, 2023).

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

Our study has three main strengths. First, we measured inhibition and attention shifting ability using multiple tasks for each EF ability. This approach provided two advantages: (1) we could distinguish between general versus specific processes, and (2) we could measure EF abilities without task-specific measurement error. Second, we used DDM to distinguish between evidence accumulation (EF ability, general speed of processing), response caution, and non-decision time (stimulus encoding, response execution). The DDM allowed us to better understand the cognitive processes driving performance in people with more exposure to adversity. Third, we included a large, representative sample of the Dutch population sample with sufficient variance on key adversity measures.

Our study has three main limitations. First, although we included confounding variables based on explicit, theory-guided causal assumptions, the cross-sectional and partly retrospective nature of our data prohibit us from establishing true causal relationships. Second, due to time constraints, we only included two inhibition tasks and three attention shifting tasks, limiting our ability to model shared variance between them. Future studies could include more EF tasks, and ideally include several basic processing speed tasks. Third, participants completed the cognitive tasks online in their own home. Despite our controlling for environmental factors that may have disrupted task performance, the home setting may have reduced the reliability of performance measures.

We envision three future directions. First, because adversity tends to be associated with task-general processes, it will be important to better understand the nature of these processes. To the extent that task-general drift rates reflect general processing speed, it may partly result from lower white matter tract integrity (Fuhrmann et al., 2020; Kievit et al., 2016). Such associations with structural brain differences may account for the finding that task-general drift rate is relatively stable over time (Schubert et al., 2016; Weigard & Sripada, 2021). Yet, task-general drift rate may be associated with other factors such as effort, fatigue, or hunger (Weigard & Sripada, 2021), which may play a bigger role for people from adverse environments (Brose et al., 2012; Schwabe et al., 2013; Sliwinski et al., 2006). Thus, future studies may include (a combination of) brain measures or measures of mental states to better understand inter- and intrapersonal differences in task-general drift rates.

Second, future research should investigate why adversity is negatively associated with task-specific drift rates. Our results suggest that task-specific drift rates mostly capture method variance rather than specific EF abilities. We currently do not have a clear explanation for their negative associations with adversity. One possible explanation might be that the associations reflect people's difficulty with processing abstract content. Previous research found that youth with more exposure to adversity performed lower on a working memory updating task (compared with youth with fewer adversity exposures) when task stimuli were abstract geometric shapes. However, their performance equalized when the

task included real-world content (Young et al., 2022). All tasks in our study included abstract content, and each study used different stimuli, which may account for the negative associations with adversity and the lack of correlations between task-specific drift rates. However, if so, this would not explain the low correlations between congruent and incongruent conditions of both the Flanker and Simon task, as these conditions do include the same stimuli. Nevertheless, research could more systematically test associations between adversity and processing as a function of task content.

Third, future research could design preregistered, well-powered analyses to tease apart the unique effects of childhood adversity and recent adversity on cognitive performance, as well as their combined effects. Our understanding of how cognitive outcomes later in life depend on the developmental timing of adversity exposure is still limited (Frankenhuis, Young, et al., 2020). In this study, we assumed that recent adversity exposure mediates the effect of childhood adversity exposure on cognitive processes, as people who experienced adversity early in life are more likely to also experience adversity later in life (e.g., due to systemic constraints; Hazel et al. (2008)). Our study focused on adversity in adulthood, the average or summed adversity exposure over the past few years. Future research should distinguish such recent adversity from acute stress. For instance, some research suggests that childhood adversity enhances specific EF abilities, but only under situations of acute stress (Mittal et al., 2015; Young et al., 2018). Thus, future research should tease apart effects of adversity during childhood and adulthood and study how their effects are moderated by acute stress.

Constraints on generality

Our research question concerned the association between adversity exposure and performance on EF tasks, using cognitive modeling to investigate whether these associations are driven by task-general processing speed or specific EF abilities. Our target population was Dutch adults with a broad range of adversity exposures. The LISS panel ensures representation of the Dutch adult population in terms of—among other factors—age, education, and socioeconomic status. Our findings may generalize to adults in other Western populations, but not necessarily to adults in non-Western populations (Nketia et al., 2023). We used standardized inhibition and attention-shifting tasks that are often used in cognitive psychology. The findings should generalize to other tasks used to measure these abilities, as long as they rely on speeded responses. All tasks included abstract stimuli (e.g., geometric shapes, words). Results are likely to be different when using more real-world stimuli, or when changing the tasks in other ways to align them with people's lived experiences (Doebel, 2020; Miller-Cotto et al., 2022; Young et al., 2022). Participants completed the study online in their home environment. To reproduce the effects, it is important to carefully instruct participants to limit environmental distractions and complete the study in full-screen mode. The results should generalize to more standardized settings (e.g., the lab), but may not generalize to public settings outside of the home environment.

Conclusion

Adversity research has made important steps in recent years, revealing how exposure to adversity may impair certain EF abilities while enhancing others. Further progress in this field hinges on our capacity to accurately measure specific EF abilities. We show, consistent with previous research, that this is a more challenging task than typically assumed. As a result, adversity researchers likely overestimate the strength of associations between adversity and EF abilities when only analyzing raw performance. We present a way forward by building on a combination of cognitive modeling and structural equation modeling. Embracing these techniques, and revising theories in light of their findings, will enhance our understanding of how exposure to adversity shapes EF.

Chapter 4. Childhood adversity is not associated with lowered inhibition, but lower perceptual processing: A Drift Diffusion Model analysis

This chapter is based on

Vermeent, S., Young, E.S., van Gelder, J.-L., & Frankenhus, W.E. (2024). Childhood adversity is not associated with lowered inhibition, but slower perceptual processing: A Drift Diffusion Model analysis. *Cognitive Development*, 71, 101479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2024.101479>

4.0 Abstract

It is well-established that individuals who grew up in adverse conditions tend to be slower on the Flanker Task. This finding is typically interpreted to reflect difficulty inhibiting distractions. However, it might result from slower general cognitive processes (e.g., reduced general processing speed), rather than the specific ability of inhibition. We used Drift Diffusion Modeling in three online studies (total N = 1560) with young adults to understand associations of adversity with Flanker performance. We find no associations between exposure to violence and unpredictability with inhibition. Yet, although mixed, violence and unpredictability exposure were associated with lower strength of perceptual input—how well someone can process target and distractor information alike. Finally, people with lower strength of perceptual input processed information more holistically, focusing less on details. Thus, lowered Flanker performance does not necessarily imply lowered inhibition ability. Cognitive modeling reveals a different picture of abilities in adverse conditions as opposed to analyses based on raw performance.

Author contributions

All authors were involved in conceptualizing the study. SV coordinated the data collection and analyzed the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors provided feedback on the manuscript.

4.1 Introduction

The predominant view in developmental psychology is that exposure to adversity—defined as prolonged exposure to intense stress—impairs cognitive abilities. This view is supported by decades of research showing that people living in high-adversity contexts tend to score lower on a variety of cognitive tests (Hackman et al., 2010; Ursache & Noble, 2016a). Recent adaptation-based perspectives, however, have argued that people from adversity may also develop intact, or enhanced, abilities for solving problems in high-adversity contexts (Ellis et al., 2017; Frankenhuys & Weerth, 2013). Adaptation- and deficit-based perspectives are considered complementary. For instance, adversity may impair some cognitive processes, yet enhance others. Despite their compatibility, few studies have investigated how the interplay of impaired and enhanced abilities shapes performance. Across three preregistered online experiments, we used cognitive modeling to derive a process-level understanding of the association between childhood adversity and performance in the Flanker task, a popular measure of cognitive control (Ridderinkhof et al., 2021).

Attention in adverse conditions

It is well-established that early-life adversity is associated with deficits in the ability to inhibit distracting, goal-irrelevant information (Hackman et al., 2010; Ursache & Noble, 2016a). One of the leading paradigms in this literature is the Flanker task (B. A. Eriksen & Eriksen, 1974). On this task, participants typically see five arrows in a horizontal orientation, and are asked to indicate the direction of the central arrow. The flanking arrows point in the opposite direction on half of the trials, leading to interference that participants must inhibit. Slower performance in the Flanker task has been documented for children and adults with more environmental unpredictability (Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015). These findings are typically interpreted as indicating a deficit in the ability to inhibit distractions.

Similar associations have been documented for factors that increase the risk of adversity exposure, such as lower socioeconomic status (SES; Farah et al., 2006; Mezzacappa, 2004; Noble et al., 2005). Although people living in low-SES conditions experience more adversity, on average, we do not regard low SES itself as a form of adversity. First, SES and adversity can affect cognitive abilities through different mechanisms (e.g., education versus physiological stress). Second, people with low SES have diverse experiences, both positive and negative, even if adversity is more common in this group.

Some recent studies suggest that growing up in adversity may also be associated with improved abilities such as attention shifting (Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015; Young et al., 2022; but see Mezzacappa, 2004; Nweze et al., 2021). Some studies found deficit patterns on inhibition tasks alongside enhancements on other aspects of attention within the same participants. For example, one study found that young adults with more childhood unpredictability committed more errors on an Antisaccade task (a measure of inhi-

bition), but more efficiently switched their attention between tasks on an attention shifting task (Mittal et al., 2015). Similarly, children with more caregiver switches (an indicator of unpredictability) experienced more interference in the Flanker task (based on RTs), but outperformed children with fewer caregiver switches on shifting their attention between different task goals (Fields et al., 2021).

Performance on attention tasks could reflect developmental adaptation to adverse environments (Blair & Raver, 2012; D'angiulli et al., 2012; Frankenhuys, Young, et al., 2020; Mittal et al., 2015). In unpredictable or threatening conditions, the ability to detect salient peripheral information (e.g., distant noises or approaching individuals) could help to more quickly detect and act on potential threats. Over time, cognitive adaptations to such conditions could result in a general tendency to use a more diffuse scope of attention, leading to an enhanced ability to keep track of the broader environment. In line with this hypothesis, people with lower SES respond more strongly to auditory distractors (Giuliano et al., 2018; Hao & Hu, 2022; Stevens et al., 2009) and are faster to orient their attention to peripheral visual information (Mezzacappa, 2004). While potentially adaptive, a more diffuse scope of attention could come at the cost of lowered ability to ignore irrelevant distractors. This could compromise longer-term goal-directed behavior, especially in chaotic environments (e.g., a noisy classroom or a busy street).

Thus, lowered performance on tasks like the Flanker task could reflect either a cognitive impairment or a difference in attentional strategies. Distinguishing between these two possibilities is challenging for two reasons. First, few studies in the adversity literature have measured performance differences on different attention tasks within the same individual (Mezzacappa, 2004; Mittal et al., 2015). Thus, it is unclear whether lowered inhibition is related to enhanced processing of peripheral information in people from from adverse backgrounds. Second, performance on inhibition tasks is—beyond the ability to inhibit distractors—also influenced by other factors, such as a person's general processing speed and response caution (Hedge et al., 2022; Löffler et al., 2024). This means that lowered performance on inhibition tasks does not necessarily reflect inhibition difficulties. In other words, we should consider cognitive processes other than ability when drawing inferences based on inhibition tasks.

Using Drift Diffusion Modeling to estimate attention and processing styles

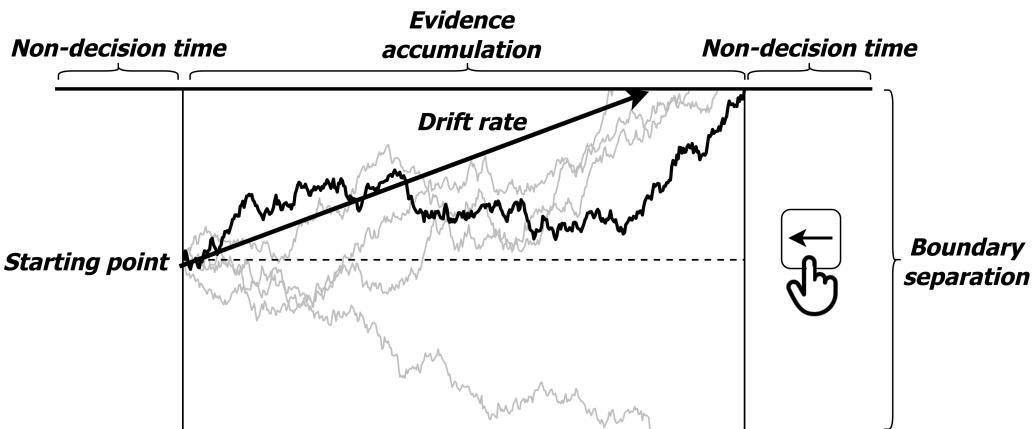
An important issue, therefore, is that several processes are involved in performance in the Flanker task, and standard assessments using raw performance measures (response times, accuracy rates) mostly fail to distinguish between them. For example, performance differences in the Flanker task could indicate that someone experiences more (or less) distractor interference, generally processes less (or more) efficiently, or responds with less (or more) caution. To understand how adversity affects performance, we need to be able to separate the difference processes that make up performance.

Formal cognitive models such as the Drift Diffusion Model (DDM; Forstmann et al., 2016; Ratcliff et al., 2015; Ratcliff & McKoon, 2008; Ratcliff & Rouder, 1998; Wagenmakers, 2009) provide a potential solution. The DDM estimates explicitly models the cognitive processes underlying the decision-making (See Figure 4.1a). It represents decision-making on binary decision-making tasks as a process in which people accumulate information until one response is sufficiently favored over the other. These two response options are represented as opposing boundaries. One boundary corresponds to the correct response and the other to the incorrect response (note that in some research designs, the boundaries may be coded as the two choice options instead, for example, when the question is whether people classify a certain class of stimuli (e.g., angry faces) more efficiently than another class of stimuli (e.g., happy faces)). When the accumulated information reaches one of the two boundaries, the corresponding response is executed.

The DDM translates trial-level response times (RTs) and accuracy into three distinct cognitive processes. The speed of information accumulation is captured in a parameter called the *drift rate*. Higher drift rates are associated with faster responses and higher mean accuracy. Response caution is modeled through the *boundary separation*; that is, the width between the two boundaries. Larger boundary separation is associated with larger RTs and higher accuracy (i.e., sacrificing speed to increase accuracy). *Non-decision time* represents the time it takes to prepare for the task at the start of the trial (before information accumulation starts) and the time it takes to execute a response (after a response boundary has been reached). Longer non-decision times are associated with larger RTs, without influencing accuracy. Finally, the *starting point* represents a potential bias towards one of two responses, with a biased decision-making process starting closer to one boundary relative to the other boundary.

The Shrinking Spotlight (SSP) model is an extension of the standard DDM to account for attention processes in the Flanker task (Grange, 2016; White et al., 2011, 2018; White & Curl, 2018). The SSP model assumes that attention resembles a spotlight that is normally distributed over the Flanker task arrows (with a particular starting *attentional width*). Over time, people narrow their attention down to the central arrow (at a rate defined by the *shrinking rate*), thereby gradually decreasing interference from irrelevant information [cf. C. W. Eriksen & St. James (1986); see Figure 4.1b]. Prior work has defined the amount of distractor *interference* by dividing the attentional width by the shrinking rate (White et al., 2018). People may experience less interference either by starting with a narrower attentional width, and/or by more rapidly shrinking their attention down to the target arrow. Finally, performance is also influenced by the *perceptual input* strength; that is, how well someone can process the arrows in general. Note that typical interpretations of lowered raw Flanker task performance are in terms of the amount of interference that someone experiences, and not in terms of the strength of perceptual input.

A. The Drift Diffusion Model (DDM)



B. The Shrinking Spotlight Model (SSP)

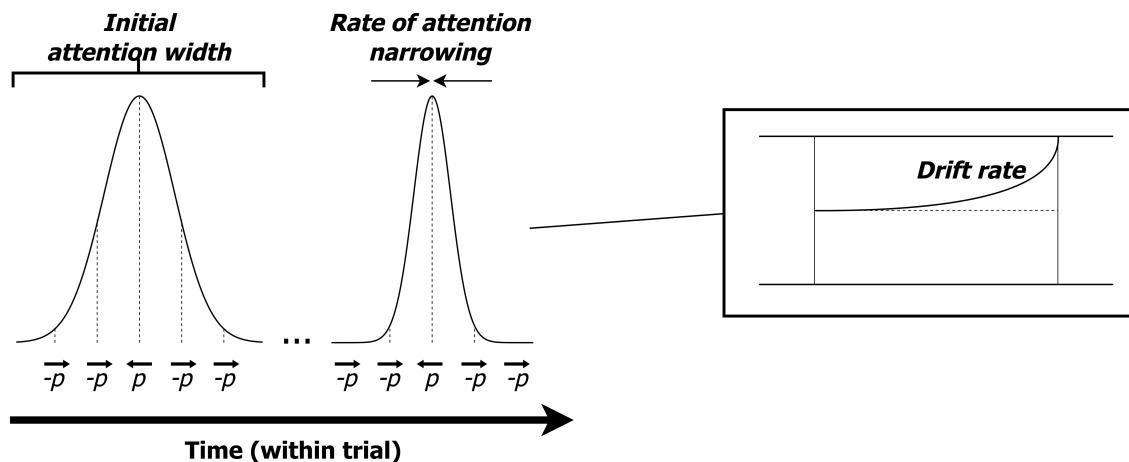


Figure 4.1. A visual overview of the Drift Diffusion Model (DDM) and the Shrinking Spotlight Model (SSP). Panel A: The DDM assumes that people go through three distinct stages on cognitive tasks with two response options. In a first preparation phase, they encode the stimuli. In a second decision phase, people accumulate evidence for both decisions (e.g., pressing left vs. right) until the decision boundary for either the correct or incorrect response is reached. Each jagged line represents this information accumulation process on a single trial. In a third execution phase, people execute the motor response. The model estimates four parameters reflecting distinct cognitive processes (printed in italic): (1) The drift rate represents the average rate of evidence accumulation and measures processing speed; (2) The non-decision time represents stimulus encoding and response execution; (3) The boundary separation represents the space between decision boundaries, and measures a person's level of response caution; (4) The starting point (not considered here) represents a potential bias towards a response, with a biased decision-making process starting relatively closer to one boundary. Panel B: The SSP is an extension of the standard DDM including additional parameters to capture attentional processes on the Flanker task. Each arrow provides a certain strength of perceptual input (p). On incongruent trials, the perceptual input of flanking arrows is coded negatively ($-p$). Attention is assumed to be normally distributed over the arrows with a certain attentional width. Over time, attention narrows down toward the central arrow at a rate determined by the shrinking rate, which gradually lowers interference from flanking arrows. The drift rate in the SSP model is the sum of each arrow's perceptual input multiplied by the attention allotted to each arrow. As attention for the flanking arrows decreases over time, the drift rate is assumed to increase over time (contrary to the standard DDM, which assumes a linear drift rate).

The DDM and SSP model share many assumptions. Both provide identical estimates of boundary separation and non-decision time. The main difference is the decision-making phase. The DDM assumes that the quality of the information is the same across the entire trial. In contrast, the SSP model assumes that the quality of the information improves across the trial, as attention becomes gradually focused more on the central arrow. The simpler assumption of the DDM makes the model broadly applicable, but less precise for conflict tasks. The SSP model is more precise, but applicable only to the Flanker task. Previous studies have successfully applied the DDM to Flanker task data (e.g., Löffler et al., 2024; Vermeent et al., 2024). However, unlike the DDM, the SSP model affords testing hypotheses about the association between adversity and attentional interference in the Flanker task. Specifically, we are interested in how childhood adversity is associated with both interference and the strength of perceptual input. Finally, the SSP model is one of several completing diffusion models developed to explain performance on conflict tasks (Hübner et al., 2010; Ulrich et al., 2015). We focus exclusively on the SSP model because it performs well with relatively few trials per participant relative to other conflict diffusion models (White et al., 2018).

Overview of studies

The overarching goal of our studies is to understand the attentional and processing styles that people develop in conditions of adversity. We focus on measures of exposure to violence and environmental unpredictability. Previous research shows that these two types of adversity are on the one hand associated with improved attention shifting and working memory updating (Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015; Young et al., 2018, 2022), and on the other hand with lowered inhibition and working memory capacity (Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015; Young et al., 2018). We conducted three online studies: one pilot study and two follow-up studies. Using cognitive modeling, we unpack Flanker task performance in comparison to other tasks that require externally focused attention (Pilot study), across visual processing manipulations (Study 1), and in terms of tendencies for holistic versus local processing (Study 2).

We used an incremental preregistration approach across studies (for all preregistrations, data, code and materials, see https://stefanvermeent.github.io/attention_project/). For each study, we preregistered confirmatory (i.e., hypothesis-driven) and exploratory analyses. The main text addresses the confirmatory analyses involving violence exposure and the exploratory analyses involving environmental unpredictability. We describe the other exploratory analyses in the supplemental materials (section 2). For an overview of all deviations from the preregistrations, see section 4 of the supplemental materials.

4.2 Pilot study

In the Pilot study, our goal was to understand how childhood adversity relates to performance on tasks with different attentional demands. Participants completed self-report measures of childhood adversity and three cognitive tasks (Flanker task, Cued Attention

task, and Change Detection task). These tasks measured inhibition, attention for peripheral cues, and attention for subtle changes. In line with the idea that exposure to adversity may lead to a more diffuse scope of attention, we expected people with more violence exposure to be better at detecting peripheral stimuli and subtle changes. We expected this would result in a higher drift rate (faster speed of information accumulation) or shorter non-decision times (faster attention orientation, among other things), but not necessarily with differences in boundary separation (response caution). In contrast, we expected that participants with more violence exposure would be worse at ignoring distracting peripheral stimuli. We expected this would result in more experienced interference (as derived from the SSP model).

Methods

Participants

Participants were 565 people from the United States aged between 18 and 30 recruited on Prolific Academic (<https://www.prolific.co>) (See Table 4.1 for demographic data). The sample was balanced on sex. We used the MacArthur's ladder, included in Prolific's pre-screening battery, for assessing perceived SES to ensure about half of the sample came from lower-SES backgrounds (which we defined as a score of 4 or below). Participants were eligible if they spoke fluent English and did not report color-blindness. We obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social & Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University (FETC20-490).

Table 4.1. Demographic information for all studies.

	Pilot study	Study 1	Study 2
N	512	497	551
Mean age (SD)	24 (4)	25 (3)	26 (3)
Sex (%)			
Male	49.4	49.3	49.9
Female	50.0	49.7	49.2
Prefer not to say	0.6	0.8	0.9
Intersex	0	0.2	0
Highest education (%)			
Some high school	1.2	1.2	1.6
GED	1.8	1.6	2.4
High school diploma	17.8	14.7	15.1
Some college but no college degree	32.6	27.6	25.2
Associate's degree	6.8	8.2	10.2
Bachelor's or RN degree	31.6	37.2	35.8
Master's degree	7.2	7.8	7.6
Doctoral or law degree	1.0	1.6	1.6
Prefer not to say	0	0	0.5
Social class (%)			
Poor	6.0	7.8	7.8
Working class	30.5	34.8	36.7
Middle class	46.1	40.2	39.2
Upper-middle class	16.4	16.1	14.5
Upper class	1.0	0.8	0.9
Don't know/prefer not to say	0	0.2	0.9

We conducted a power simulation using the *faux* package in R (DeBruine, 2021) to determine the minimally required number of participants for standardized regression coefficients of 0.10 and 0.15 (for details and simulation code, see https://stefanvermeent.github.io/attention_project/preregistrations/README.html). Power was $> .80$ for adversity x task condition interactions with $N = 450$ or more. For a linear main effect, detecting an effect of $\beta = 0.15$ with .90 power would require $N = 462$. We sampled 550 participants, anticipating a final sample of ~500 after exclusions.

Prior to analyzing the data, we applied our preregistered exclusion criteria. First, we excluded participants who did not complete the full study; second, those who had incomplete data on any of the attention tasks; third, those who missed both attention check items; fourth, those who had suspicious response patterns (e.g., consistently endorsing high response options even though some items were reverse coded). Fifth, on a trial-level, we excluded any trials with reaction times < 250 ms or > 3500 ms (Ratcliff & Childers, 2015). Participants with more than 10 trials removed were completely excluded from the analyses. The final sample consisted of 512 participants.

Procedure

Participants completed the experiment on their own laptop or desktop computer. Participants could refrain from answering any of the questionnaire items and were prompted with a warning once per page in case of missing items.

After providing consent, participants completed three attention tasks. They were asked to move to a quiet room in the house, where they would be unlikely to be distracted by other people or outside noises. The order of the tasks was counterbalanced between subjects. At the onset of the first task, the experiment went into full-screen mode to limit distractions from other programs or browser tabs. The size of the task stimuli was controlled between subjects using the resize plugin in JsPsych (Leeuw, 2015). Participants were asked to hold a credit card (or similarly sized card) up against the screen and to increase the size of a blue rectangle on the screen until it matched the size of the credit card. The stimulus display for each task was resized so that 100 pixels corresponded to 1 inch for all participants. After successfully resizing the screen, participants completed all three tasks. During the task, the cursor was hidden from the screen to minimize distractions. After completing the attention tasks, participants completed the questionnaire battery and demographic questions. Finally, we asked participants whether they ever got up or were interrupted during the study, and how noisy their environment was during the attention tasks. The full experiment took ~35 minutes. Participants were paid £4.38 when they reached the end of the experiment.

Cognitive measures

The attention tasks were programmed in JsPsych version 3.6.1 (Leeuw, 2015). For all materials and links to working versions of the tasks, see the Github repository.

Flanker task. The Flanker task measures selective attention and response inhibition (B. A. Eriksen & Eriksen, 1974). The Flanker task began with eight practice trials, followed by 64 test trials. On each trial, participants saw a set of five arrows pointing either left or right. Participants were instructed to indicate the direction of the central arrow by pressing the respective arrow keys, while ignoring the flanking arrows to the left and right. All trials included black arrows against a white background. In the *congruent* trials (50%), the flanking arrows pointed in the same direction as the central arrow. In the *incongruent* trials (50%), the arrows pointed in the opposite direction. The arrows were randomly presented in the top-half or bottom-half of the screen. Each trial started with a fixation cross (1000 ms), after which the arrows were visible until a response was given. Participants received performance feedback during the practice trials, but not during the test block.

Cued Attention task. The Cued Attention task was an adapted version of the Posner task, which measures the speed of attention for peripheral cues (Posner, 1980). The Cued Attention task began with eight practice trials, followed by 64 test trials. On each trial, a left- or right-pointing arrow was presented in one of eight random locations at 300 pixels from the center of the screen. Participants were instructed to indicate the direction of the

arrow by pressing either the left- or right arrow key on their keyboard. All trials included a black cue and arrow against a white background. On *cued* trials (50%), a cue ("*") preceded the arrow in the exact same location. On *neutral* trials (50%), the cue preceded the arrow, but appeared at the center of the screen (not where the arrow would appear). Thus, the cue was perfectly predictive of the target location on cued trials, but provided no predictive information about the location of the arrow on neutral trials. Each trial started with a fixation cross at the center of the screen for 1000 ms. Then, the cue appeared for 250 ms, followed by the target arrow, until a response was given.

Change Detection task. The Change Detection task measures the ability to detect subtle spatial changes. The Change Detection task started with five practice trials followed by 50 test trials. On each trial, participants saw five colored circles (red, light-blue, dark-blue, yellow, and purple) against a gray background, each with a radius of 15 pixels. Each circle was located in a semi-random location around the central fixation cross. The location of each circle was sampled within a pre-specified area of 50-by-50 pixels to prevent overlap. Participants had 1000 ms to memorize the locations of the five circles. Then, the circles disappeared for 500 ms and then reappeared. On *change* trials (50%), one of the circles had moved to another location with a fixed displacement of 40 pixels in a 360 degree direction. On *no change* trials (50%), all circles were still in the same location. Participants were instructed to indicate whether all circles were still in the same location or one of the circles had changed location by pressing the left- or right-arrow key. The displacement of *one* circle was the only potential difference on each trial;

DDM/SSP parameters. We analyzed Flanker task performance with the SSP model (Grange, 2016; White et al., 2011, 2018; White & Curl, 2018), using the *flankr* package (Grange, 2016). For each participant, the SSP provided us with estimates of: (1) strength of perceptual input (general quality of information that participants get from the arrows), (2) interference (initial attention width divided by the speed at which attention is narrowed down to the central arrow), (3) non-decision time (combination of speed of initial stimulus encoding and response execution), and (4) boundary separation (response caution). We always fixed the starting-point to the midpoint between the two boundaries, as modeling bias makes little sense when the boundaries correspond to correct and incorrect responses (as is the case here), rather than the distinct response options. Our focus on interference as a ratio between attention width and shrinking rate deviated from the preregistration, as we initially planned to investigate both aspects of attention separately. However, we discovered that both parameters in isolation were unreliable because of an inherent trade-off, while the ratio did provide a stable measure. This was supported in a simulation study by White et al. (2018) showing that the ratio measure is reliable. See the supplemental materials (section 3) for a comparison between the preregistered and the updated analyses.

For the Change Detection task and the Cued Attention task, we used a hierarchical Bayesian implementation of the standard DDM (HDDM). For each participant, the HDDM provided us with estimates of: (1) drift rate (speed of information accumulation; analogous to strength of perceptual input in the SSP model, except that drift rate is time-invariant), (2) non-decision time (same as in the SSP model), and (3) boundary separation (same as in the SSP model). The hierarchical Bayesian fitting procedure was a deviation from the preregistration, in which we planned to use Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation. There were several issues with estimating DDM parameters for the Cued Attention task, which we later discovered were caused specifically by ML. An important difference between HDDM and ML is that HDDM uses the group information to inform individual parameter estimates, whereas ML models are fitted to each individual separately. The hierarchical approach generally improves generally improves the accuracy of the estimation. See the supplemental materials (section 3) for an overview of the fit procedure and model fit across all studies.

Self-report measures

See Table 4.2 for bivariate correlations between measures of adversity across all studies.

Violence exposure. We measured violence exposure using the Neighborhood Violence Scale (NVS) and two items assessing involvement in violence before age 13 (Frankenhuis, Vries, et al., 2020; Frankenhuis & Bijlstra, 2018; Young et al., 2022). The NVS contains seven items measuring perceived exposure to violence before age 13 (e.g., “Crime was common in the neighborhood where I grew up”). Participants rated each on a scale from 1 (never true) to 5 (very often true). The physical fighting items assessed the number of times participants witnessed fights before age 13: “Based on your experiences, how many times did you see or hear someone being beaten up in real life, before age 13?” and “How many times were you in a physical fight, before age 13?” Answers to both items ranged from 1 (0 times) to 8 (12 or more times). The items of the NVS were averaged together (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$). Similarly, we averaged the scores on the two fighting items together. For the main analyses, we created a perceived violence exposure composite by standardizing the NVS and fighting composites and calculating an unweighted average.

Environmental unpredictability. We included five measures of environmental unpredictability across different temporal scales: (1) the Questionnaire of Unpredictability in Childhood (QUIC; Glynn et al., 2019); (2) the Perceived Childhood Unpredictability scale (Young et al., 2018); (3) the Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale (CHAOS; Matheny et al., 1995); (4) stability of the family and social environment; and (5) objective indicators of unpredictability. All scales were adapted to refer to experiences before age 13. We computed a composite measure of all z-transformed unpredictability measures. See section 2 of the supplemental materials for an exploration of the factor structure of these measures.

The QUIC captures environmental and household unpredictability. We made three preregistered changes to the original scale (Glynn et al., 2019), to better align it with the

other scales. First, all items were rated on a scale of 1 (never true) to 5 (very often true), except for four items referring to specific experiences (e.g., "I experienced changes in my custody arrangement"). For these items, we adopted a response scale with the options "never", "only once", "a couple times", "several times", "many times". Second, quantifiers such as "frequently", "often", and "There was a period of time when [...]" were dropped to better match the response scale. Third, we excluded the item "My parents got divorced" because it did not fit the new response labels and this information was already captured by one of the items of the perceived unpredictability scale. Reliability of the scale was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$).

The perceived childhood unpredictability scale included eight items measuring perceived unpredictability before age 13 (e.g., "My family life was generally inconsistent and unpredictable from day-to-day"). Participants rated each on a scale from 1 (never true) to 5 (very often true). Reliability of the scale was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$).

The CHAOS consists of 15 items measuring the level of chaos in the household (e.g., "No matter how hard we tried, we always seemed to be running late"). All items were rated on a scale of 1 (never true) to 5 (very often true) instead of the original yes/no answer format. Reliability of the scale was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$).

We included one additional scale to measure the stability of the family and social environment. On a scale of 1 (the same all the time) to 5 (constant and rapid changes), participants indicated how often the following aspects of their family and social environment changed before age 13: (1) economic status; (2) family environment; (3) childhood neighborhood environment; and (4) childhood school environment.

Finally, we included four objective measures of unpredictability before age 13: 1) "How often did you move?"; 2) "How many adults lived in your home on average?"; 3) "How many romantic partners did your mother have (not counting your father)?"; 4) "How many romantic partners did your father have (not counting your mother)?". Previous studies have found associations between (subsets of) these measures and subjective measures of adversity as well as with developmental outcomes (Belsky et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 2009; Young et al., 2022).

Table 4.2. Pooled bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics of measures of childhood violence exposure and environmental unpredictability across the three studies.

	Violence exposure			Environmental unpredictability						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Neigh. violence	-									
2. Fighting	0.50***	-								
3. Violence comp.	0.87***	0.86***	-							
4. QUIC	0.52***	0.46***	0.56***	-						
5. Perc. unpredictability	0.36***	0.32***	0.39***	0.81***	-					
6. CHAOS	0.46***	0.41***	0.50***	0.84***	0.79***	-				
7. Env. change	0.36***	0.35***	0.43***	0.59***	0.50***	0.45***	-			
8. Obj. unpredictability	0.39***	0.32***	0.37***	0.56***	0.56***	0.40***	0.73***	-		
9. Subj. Unpredictability	0.47***	0.44***	0.53***	0.93***	0.94***	0.94***	0.54***	0.51***	-	
10. Unpredictability comp.	0.49***	0.45***	0.53***	0.89***	0.87***	0.82***	0.71***	0.81***	0.92***	-
Mean	1.94	1.97	-0.01	2.13	2.11	2.41	1.83	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01
SD	0.83	1.34	0.85	0.72	0.98	0.83	0.78	0.69	1.00	0.74
Median	1.71	1.50	-0.28	2.03	1.88	2.33	1.75	-0.21	-0.20	-0.17
Min	1.00	1.00	-0.98	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	-0.85	-1.59	-1.15
Max	5.00	8.00	3.99	4.84	5.00	4.87	5.00	5.37	3.46	3.97
Skew	1.36	2.03	1.48	0.65	0.81	0.40	1.35	2.35	0.63	1.08
Kurtosis	1.65	4.67	2.34	0.05	-0.27	-0.45	2.08	8.04	-0.21	1.52

Note: * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$. CHAOS = Chaos, Hubbub, and Order Scale; Env. change = environmental change; Obj. unpredictability = objective unpredictability; Neigh. violence = neighborhood violence; Perc. unpredictability = perceived unpredictability; QUIC = Questionnaire of Unpredictability in Childhood; Subj. unpredictability = subjective unpredictability; SD = standard deviation; Unpredictability comp. = unpredictability composite; Violence comp = violence composite.

Data analyses

Multiverse analysis. In an amendment to the preregistration, we quantified the robustness of our findings against six data cleaning decisions that may affect the robustness of online studies by using multiverse analysis, using the *multitool* package (Young & Vermeent, 2023). Multiverse analysis allows for systematically evaluating the robustness of analyses across all combinations of different arbitrary data processing decisions (for details, see Del Giudice & Gangestad, 2021; Simonsohn et al., 2020; Steegen et al., 2016). Specifically, we looked at the influence of including or excluding 1) participants who scored below 0.5 on a build-in bot-detection measure on Prolific (potentially indicating a bot); 2) participants who did not rescale their screen at the start of the experiment; 3) participants who did not enter fullscreen mode prior to starting the tasks; 4) participants who exited fullscreen mode at any point during the tasks; 5) participants who indicated high levels of noise in their environment; 6) participants who indicated extreme interruptions during the experiment. See the supplemental materials (section 5) for figures summarizing p -distributions and the explained variance in the regression coefficients of each data cleaning decision.

Confirmatory analyses. For the Cued Attention and Flanker task RTs, we used linear mixed effects models to test violence exposure x task condition (sum-coded) interactions on mean RTs (calculated separately for each condition) and each DDM parameter. All mixed effects models included a random intercept for participants. For the Change Detection and Flanker task SSP parameters, we used linear regression models to test the main effect of adversity on mean RTs and each DDM/SSP parameter. We did not analyze accuracy rates as these were close to ceiling for the Flanker and Cued Attention task. To

meet model assumptions of normally distributed residuals, mean reaction time were log-transformed, separately for the congruent and incongruent condition. Analyses involving interference (Flanker task) and boundary separation (all tasks) parameters violated the assumption of normally distributed residuals. For boundary separation, we solved this using log-transformation. For interference, non-normality was caused by extreme outliers ($>3.2\text{SD}$), which we excluded from the analyses.

Results and discussion

Table 4.3 summarizes the results. In the flanker task, More violence exposure was associated with lower strength of perceptual input under 31.25% of multiverse specifications (although the median 95% CI interval contained zero). We additionally found a significant main effect of violence exposure on interference under 100.00% of multiverse specifications, such that more violence exposure was associated with less interference. This was contrary to our expectation that people exposed to adversity would have more difficulties dealing with interference from irrelevant distractors.

Participants with more exposure to childhood violence were slower in the Cued Attention task, which was mainly related to a higher level of response caution (boundary separation). in the Change Detection task, more childhood violence exposure was associated with slower speed of information processing (drift rate) under 50.00% of multiverse specifications, but not with longer RTs. These results were not in line with our expectation that people from adversity would perform better on cognitive tasks that require a broad, present-focused attention style.

Exploratory analyses did not show any significant associations with Flanker task performance. Participants with more exposure to childhood unpredictability were slower in the Cued Attention task (main effect) (median $\beta = 0.11$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.19], 81.25 % of $ps <.05$), which was related to slower non-decision time (median $\beta = 0.10$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.17], 100.00 % of $ps <.05$). We did not find a significant association between exposure to childhood unpredictability and mean RTs on the Change Detection task, although more unpredictability was negatively associated with drift rates (median $\beta = -0.10$, 95% CI = [-0.20, -0.00], 53.12 % of $ps <.05$).

Table 4.3. Main and interaction effects of the effect of violence exposure on task performance.

	Main Effect			Interaction		
	β	95% CI	p (%)	β	95% CI	p (%)
Cued Attention Task						
Raw response time	0.10	[0.01, 0.19]	67.19	0.01	[-0.01, 0.02]	0
Drift rate	0.00	[-0.08, 0.09]	0.00	-0.04	[-0.08, 0.01]	31.25
Non-decision time	0.05	[-0.03, 0.13]	0.00	-0.02	[-0.07, 0.02]	9.375
Boundary separation	0.10	[-0.01, 0.20]	43.75			
Change Detection Task						
Raw response time	0.05	[-0.05, 0.15]	0.00			
Drift rate	-0.10	[-0.20, 0.00]	50.00			
Non-decision time	-0.04	[-0.14, 0.06]	0.00			
Boundary separation	0.05	[-0.05, 0.16]	12.50			
Flanker Task						
Raw response time	0.05	[-0.04, 0.14]	0.00	-0.02	[-0.04, -0.00]	100
Perceptual input	-0.08	[-0.18, 0.02]	31.25			
Interference	-0.17	[-0.26, -0.07]	100.00			
Non-decision time	0.06	[-0.04, 0.17]	15.62			
Boundary separation	-0.03	[-0.13, 0.07]	0.00			

Note: The p (%) column reflects the number of analyses that produced p-values $< .05$ for a given multiverse.

The pattern of findings in the Flanker task was interesting for two reasons. First, the Flanker task is a widely used task to assess the ability to inhibit irrelevant information, and people exposed to adversity typically show lowered performance. Our pilot results, though, suggest that lowered performance may not be caused by a reduced ability to inhibit distracting information. Instead, people exposed to adversity might have a lower strength of perceptual input, leading to slower and less efficient information processing. If true, these initial findings suggest that performance might be improved through interventions that increase the visual quality of stimuli. In Study 1, we aimed to replicate and extend these findings.

4.3 Study I

The goal of Study 1 was to follow up on the Pilot study by manipulating the visual quality of information in the Flanker task. Participants completed three versions: a standard version (similar to the Pilot study), one with enhanced visual information, and one with degraded visual information. We again focused on childhood exposure to violence. Our first aim was to examine the robustness of our finding of improved interference control in the Flanker task in relation to more adversity exposure in the Pilot study. We did so by analyzing the data of the standard condition, as well as by pooling the data of the Pilot study and Study 1. Our second aim was to investigate whether manipulating visual information in the Flanker task would influence performance for people with more violence exposure.

We preregistered two potential data patterns and associated interpretations, without favoring one over the other *a priori*. First, the strength of perceptual input might be lower for people with more exposure to violence compared to people with less exposure

to violence across all conditions. Second, lower performance in the standard version might reflect an adaptive trade-off towards cognitive functioning that is less affected by noise or perturbations, at a cost of lower overall performance (Del Giudice & Crespi, 2018). In that case, we would expect the strength of perceptual input to be influenced to a lesser extent across conditions for people with more exposure to violence than for people with less exposure to violence. As a result, they might not benefit as much from enhanced visual information, yet might be able to better maintain performance with degraded information.

Methods

Participants

Participant recruitment was identical to the Pilot study. In total, 567 people from the United States between the ages of 18 and 30 participated (See Table 4.1). We obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social & Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University (FETC20-490). We applied the same exclusion criteria as reported in the Pilot study. The final sample consisted of 497 participants.

Flanker task

We programmed the Flanker task in JsPsych version 6.3.1 (Leeuw, 2015) with three conditions. Each condition consisted of eight practice trials, followed by 64 test trials. In the *standard* condition, the arrows were 40 pixels in size (0.4 inches) and had zero padding between them. In the *enhanced* condition, we increased the arrow size by 12.5% to 45 pixels (0.45 inches), and increased the space between the arrows to 5 pixels. This increased the width of the stimulus display by 50% with respect to the standard display. In the *degraded* condition, sizes and space between arrows were the same as in the standard version, but all arrows were rotated 45°. The lines of the arrows always had the same 45° angle. For example, if the flanking arrows pointed to the upper-left on an incongruent trial, the central arrow pointed to the lower-right. On congruent trials, all arrows pointed in the same direction (e.g., upper-right). Participants completed each condition separately in different blocks, in randomized order.

Self-report measures

The self-report measures were identical to those used in the Pilot study.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to the Pilot study. The full experiment took approximately 30 minutes. Participants were paid £3.75 after they completed the full study.

Data analyses

Multiverse analysis. We included the same arbitrary decisions in the multiverse analyses as in the Pilot study. For the pooled analyses—i.e., joint analysis of the Pilot study and the standard condition of Study 1—there was one minor change in how we included screen rescaling as a preprocessing decision in the multiverse. In Study 1, we changed the screen rescaling procedure by converting the initial size of the resize box to 300 pixels instead of 100 pixels. This way, the stimulus display would still be close to the intended size if par-

ticipants did not engage in any resizing. However, this led to one important change for the pooled analysis: rescaling (yes or no) was included as an arbitrary exclusion decision in the multiverse analyses with four combinations: (1) exclude non-scalers in both studies; (2) include non-scalers in both studies; (3) exclude non-scalers in the Pilot study, include non-scalers in Study 1; (4) include non-scalers in the Pilot study, exclude non-scalers in Study 1.

For each analysis, we report the median β s, 95% confidence intervals, and the proportion of p -values $< .05$ across all analytic decisions. For the confirmatory analyses, we used bootstrapping to compute the probability of obtaining an effect size at least as extreme as observed in the real data, conditioned on a true effect size of zero (for details, see Simonsohn et al., 2020). See the supplemental materials (section 5) for figures summarizing p -distributions and the explained variance in the regression coefficients of each data cleaning decision.

Confirmatory analyses. To address the first aim, we analyzed the data from the standard condition, as well as pooled the Flanker task data of the Pilot study and the current study. We ran separate linear models for each SSP parameter as well as RT difference scores (based on log-transformed mean RTs of each condition) with violence exposure as main predictor and study as covariate (effect-coded). To address the second aim, we analyzed the effect of violence exposure and Flanker task condition type on performance using linear mixed effects models with a random intercept per participant. The five main dependent variables were mean RT difference (based on log-transformed mean RTs of each condition) and the SSP parameters: Perceptual input, boundary separation, non-decision time, and interference. For each outcome measure, we ran two separate models: one comparing the standard condition with the enhanced condition, and one comparing the standard condition with the degraded condition. In both models, condition was dummy-coded using the standard condition as the reference group.

The use of RT difference scores differed from the Pilot study, where we included task condition as a moderator. We opted for RT difference scores here (as well as in Study 2) to prevent the use of three-way interactions, for which we did not have enough power.

Results and discussion

Standard Flanker performance

Table 4.4 summarizes the multiverse results for the effects of violence exposure (confirmatory analysis) and unpredictability (exploratory analysis). Unlike in the Pilot study, we did not find any significant associations with violence exposure. In the exploratory analysis, there was a significant negative association between unpredictability and perceptual input (median $\beta = -0.12$, 95% CI = $[-0.22, -0.03]$, 100.00 % of $ps < .05$).

Table 4.4. Standardized effects of violence exposure and unpredictability on Flanker performance in study 1.

	β	95% CI	p (%)	p
Violence exposure (confirmatory)				
RT _{difference}	0.04	[−0.06, 0.13]	0.00	.476
Perceptual input	-0.02	[−0.12, 0.07]	0.00	.596
Interference	0.02	[−0.07, 0.12]	0.00	.630
Non-decision time	-0.01	[−0.10, 0.09]	0.00	.850
Boundary separation	0.03	[−0.07, 0.12]	0.00	.542
Unpredictability (exploratory)				
RT _{difference}	-0.03	[−0.12, 0.07]	0.00	.596
Perceptual input	-0.12	[−0.22, −0.03]	100.00	.046
Interference	0.09	[−0.01, 0.18]	34.38	.126
Non-decision time	-0.03	[−0.12, 0.07]	0.00	.592
Boundary separation	-0.04	[−0.14, 0.05]	0.00	.362

Note: The p (%) column reflects the number of analyses that produced p-values < .05 for a given multiverse. We computed overall p-values using a bootstrapped resampling method, which reflect the probability of obtaining an effect size as extreme or more extreme given the median effect is 0.

After pooling the data of the Pilot study and Study 1, there was a negative association between violence exposure and interference (median $\beta = -0.07$, 95% CI = [−0.14, −0.00], 64.06 % of ps <.05, bootstrapped $p = .028$). Violence exposure was associated with lower strength of perceptual input under 64.06% of multiverse specifications, but the bootstrapped p -value was not significant (median $\beta = -0.05$, 95% CI = [−0.12, 0.01], bootstrapped $p = .100$). We did not find other significant associations for either violence exposure or unpredictability.

Flanker task conditions

The main effects of task condition on the strength of perceptual input were in the expected direction: relative to the standard condition, the quality of perceptual input was higher in the enhanced condition (median $\beta = 0.09$, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.13], 100.00 % of ps <.05) and lower in the degraded condition (median $\beta = -0.13$, 95% CI = [−0.18, −0.08], 100.00 % of ps <.05). Interference was lower in the enhanced condition (median $\beta = -0.26$, 95% CI = [−0.31, −0.21], 100.00 % of ps <.05). Unexpectedly, interference was also lower in the degraded condition (median $\beta = -0.10$, 95% CI = [−0.16, −0.04], 100.00 % of ps <.05), suggesting that the angle in the flanking arrows reduced interference, relative to the standard condition. However, none of the interaction effects for either violence exposure or unpredictability were significant (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5. Standardized interaction effects of violence exposure (confirmatory analysis) and unpredictability (secondary analysis) on Flanker performance across standard, enhanced, and degraded conditions.

	Violence exposure X Condition			Unpredictability X Condition		
	β	95% CI	p (%)	β	95% CI	p (%)
Standard - Enhanced						
RT	-0.01	[-0.06, 0.04]	0.00	-0.03	[-0.09, 0.02]	3.12
Perceptual input	0.03	[-0.01, 0.08]	0.00	0.02	[-0.03, 0.07]	0.00
Interference	-0.01	[-0.06, 0.04]	0.00	-0.04	[-0.09, 0.01]	25.00
Non-decision time	0.00	[-0.05, 0.05]	0.00	0.02	[-0.03, 0.07]	0.00
Boundary separation	0.01	[-0.04, 0.06]	0.00	0.00	[-0.05, 0.06]	0.00
Standard - Degraded						
RT	0.03	[-0.03, 0.09]	6.25	-0.01	[-0.07, 0.05]	0.00
Perceptual input	0.01	[-0.04, 0.06]	0.00	0.04	[-0.02, 0.09]	0.00
Interference	0.01	[-0.05, 0.06]	0.00	-0.03	[-0.09, 0.02]	4.69
Non-decision time	-0.02	[-0.07, 0.04]	0.00	-0.02	[-0.07, 0.04]	0.00
Boundary separation	0.03	[-0.03, 0.08]	0.00	0.04	[-0.02, 0.10]	0.00

Note: Task conditions were dummy-coded with the standard condition as the reference. The p (%) column reflects the number of analyses that produced p-values $< .05$ for a given multiverse.

The results of the Pilot study and Study 1 were inconsistent with regard to the association between adversity and interference, but hinted at two general patterns. First, violence exposure was not associated with *increased* interference; instead, we found either the opposite effect or no effect. Second, both violence exposure and unpredictability were associated with lowered strength of perceptual input, albeit inconsistently. These findings, if replicable, are intriguing as they would suggest that the common finding of lowered Flanker task performance among people with more adversity exposure do not actually result from worse interference control—as typically inferred. Rather, such lowered performance would result from processes other than inhibition ability, such as slower general processing. Though interesting, our findings so far leave open the question why adversity might be negatively associated with perceptual input. This question was the focus of Study 2.

4.4 Study 2

Study 2 set out to compare two explanations for the finding that people exposed to adversity tended to show lower strength of perceptual input in the Flanker task. First, lowered strength of perceptual input in people exposed to adversity may indicate a difficulty in extracting relevant information (i.e., about their direction) from the arrows in general. Second, the difference in perceptual input may not be a cognitive deficit per se, but instead could be a signature of a difference in processing style—that is, a feature, and not a bug. People exposed to adversity may process information more holistically, focusing more on the configuration of pieces of information rather than individual pieces of information. In the Flanker task, this would lower the depth of perceptual processing of any individual

Childhood adversity is not associated with lowered inhibition, but lower perceptual processing

stimulus, thus resulting in lowered strength of perceptual input, as we observed in the Pilot study and Study 1.

We preregistered three aims focusing both on violence exposure and unpredictability. First, we expected to replicate our earlier findings that adversity was associated with lowered perceptual input and lower interference in people exposed to adversity. Second, we included a Global-Local task to investigate the hypothesis—based on the findings of the Pilot study and Study 1—that people with more adverse experiences would develop a more holistic style of information processing. Third, we planned to conduct a within-subjects analysis of Flanker and Global-Local task performance to assess whether people with lowered perceptual input in the Flanker task would also show a more global processing style (rather than a local processing style) in the Global-Local task.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 600 people from the United States between the ages of 18 and 30. Recruitment was identical to Study 1. We obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social & Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University (FETC20-490). We conducted a simulation-based power analysis for the planned linear mixed models with the Global Local task (see GitHub). We determined that power of $> .80$ for a standardized interaction effect of 0.06, with sigma (noise) set to 0.7 (comparable to observed sigmas in the first two studies) would require 550 participants. We recruited 600 participants, with the expectation to have a final sample of 550 participants after exclusions. We applied the same exclusion criteria as reported in the Pilot study and Study 1. The final sample consisted of 551 participants.

Measures

The measures of childhood violence exposure and environmental unpredictability were identical to Study 1. The Flanker task was identical to the standard version used in Study 1.

Global-Local task. The Global-Local task is a measure of global-local processing (Navon, 1977). Many different versions of this task exist in the literature. One key dimension on which they differ is whether the task measures focused attention (by cueing attention towards the global or local level prior to stimulus presentation) or divided attention (by having participants search for a target on both levels) (Lee et al., 2023). Here, we use a version measuring divided attention, which allows measuring whether someone tends to have a more global versus local processing style (Hakim et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2023; McKone et al., 2010).

Participants saw images of big, black letters (the global level) comprising small letters (the local level)—so-called Navon images (Navon, 1977)—against a white background. Participants first completed eight practice trials, after which they completed an additional

64 test trials. On each trial, participants searched for one of two target letters—an ‘E’ or ‘H’—and indicated whether it was present on the global or local level by pressing ‘g’ or ‘l’ on their keyboard, respectively. Each stimulus was 600 pixels high and 395 pixels wide and comprised seven local letters vertically and five local letters horizontally. The stimuli consisted of combinations of the letters ‘T’, ‘F’, ‘P’, ‘L’, ‘H’, and ‘E’. All stimuli always contained one (and only one) of the target letters ‘H’ and ‘E’ on either the local or global level. The other letters were randomly varied, and the global and local level never contained the same letter. Thus, the global-local task did not contain a congruent and incongruent condition as did the Flanker task.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to Study 1. The full experiment took ~30 minutes. Participants were paid £4.50 when they reached the end of the experiment.

Data analyses

Multiverse analysis. We included the same decisions in the multiverse as in the previous studies. However, there was one deviation from the preregistration: the multiverse analysis contained the same arbitrary decisions as the Pilot study and Study 1, instead of a subset, as we preregistered (for details, https://stefanvermeent.github.io/attention_project/preregistrations/README.html). See the supplemental materials (section 5) for figures summarizing *p*-distributions and the explained variance in the regression coefficients of each data cleaning decision.

DDM estimation. For the Flanker task, we used the SSP (Grange, 2016; White et al., 2011, 2018; White & Curl, 2018) using the same procedure as in Study 1. For the Global-Local task, we used a hierarchical Bayesian DDM to fit the data using the *runjags* package (Denwood, 2016). See the supplemental materials (Section 3) for more information about the procedure and model fit.

We deviated from our preregistration regarding the preprocessing of Global-Local task data. Specifically, we relaxed the low performance threshold as the task was more difficult than anticipated. These deviations are described in the supplemental materials (section 4).

Confirmatory analyses. We ran simple regressions for analyses involving only main effects (aim 1), and linear mixed effects models for analyses involving within-subject interactions (aim 2 and 3). To address aim 3 (within-subject interaction between Global-Local task drift rate and Flanker task strength of perceptual input), we further preprocessed the data in two steps. First, we computed a difference score of Global-Local drift rates by subtracting the drift rate on local trials from the drift rate on global trials (with higher scores reflecting relatively faster information processing on global trials). Second, we separately standardized the Flanker task strength of perceptual input and Global-Local task drift rate difference. We fitted linear mixed effects models with the standardized performance mea-

sures as the dependent variable, and adversity type, task (Flanker task or Global-Local task, sum-coded) and their interaction as independent variables.

Results and discussion

Figure 4.2 and 4.3 summarize the multiverse results for the effects of violence exposure and unpredictability within Study 2 and pooled across all studies. In Study 2, violence exposure was negatively associated with strength of perceptual input ($\beta_{\text{median}} = -0.18$, 95% CI = [-0.26, -0.09], 100.00 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p < .001), but not associated with interference ($\beta_{\text{median}} = -0.04$, 95% CI = [-0.14, 0.05], 0.00 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p = .672). Unpredictability was not associated with either strength of perceptual input ($\beta_{\text{median}} = -0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.15, 0.04], 3.12 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p = .026), nor with interference ($\beta_{\text{median}} = 0.03$, 95% CI = [-0.06, 0.12], 0.00 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p = .142).

In the pooled analysis, the results were similar for both types of adversity. Violence exposure was associated with lower strength of perceptual input ($\beta_{\text{median}} = -0.10$, 95% CI = [-0.17, -0.04], 100.00 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p < .001), but not with interference ($\beta_{\text{median}} = -0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.08, 0.05], 0.00 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p = .672). Similarly, unpredictability was associated with a lower quality of perceptual input ($\beta_{\text{median}} = -0.08$, 95% CI = [-0.15, -0.02], 95.31 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p = .026), but not with interference ($\beta_{\text{median}} = 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.01, 0.12], 0.00 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p = .142).

Global-Local task performance

There was a main effect of violence exposure on Global-Local drift rates, with more violence exposure being associated with slower speed of information processing ($\beta_{\text{median}} = -0.19$, 100.00% of ps < .05, bootstrapped p < .001). There also was a main effect of task condition on drift rates, with people processing information faster when the target was present at the global level compared to the local level, ($\beta_{\text{median}} = 0.05$, 100.00% of ps < .05, bootstrapped p < .001). Finally, there was an interaction effect between violence exposure and task condition ($\beta_{\text{median}} = 0.04$, 95.31 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p = .038). Simple slopes analyses revealed that participants with lower levels of violence exposure did not differ in speed of processing of global versus local targets ($b_{\text{median}} = 0.01$, 0.00% of ps < .05). In contrast, participants with higher levels of violence exposure processed global targets faster than local targets ($b_{\text{median}} = 0.08$, 100.00% of ps < .05).

There was a significant main effect of unpredictability on drift rates, with more unpredictability being associated with slower speed of information processing, ($\beta_{\text{median}} = -0.10$, 95% CI = [-0.20, -0.01], 62.50 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p = .024). We also found a main effect of task condition on drift rates, with people processing information faster when the target was present at the global level compared to the local level, ($\beta_{\text{median}} = 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.08], 100.00 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p < .001). We did not find a significant unpredictability x task condition interaction effect ($\beta_{\text{median}} = 0.03$, 95% CI = [-0.00, 0.06], 37.50 % of ps < .05, bootstrapped p = .100).

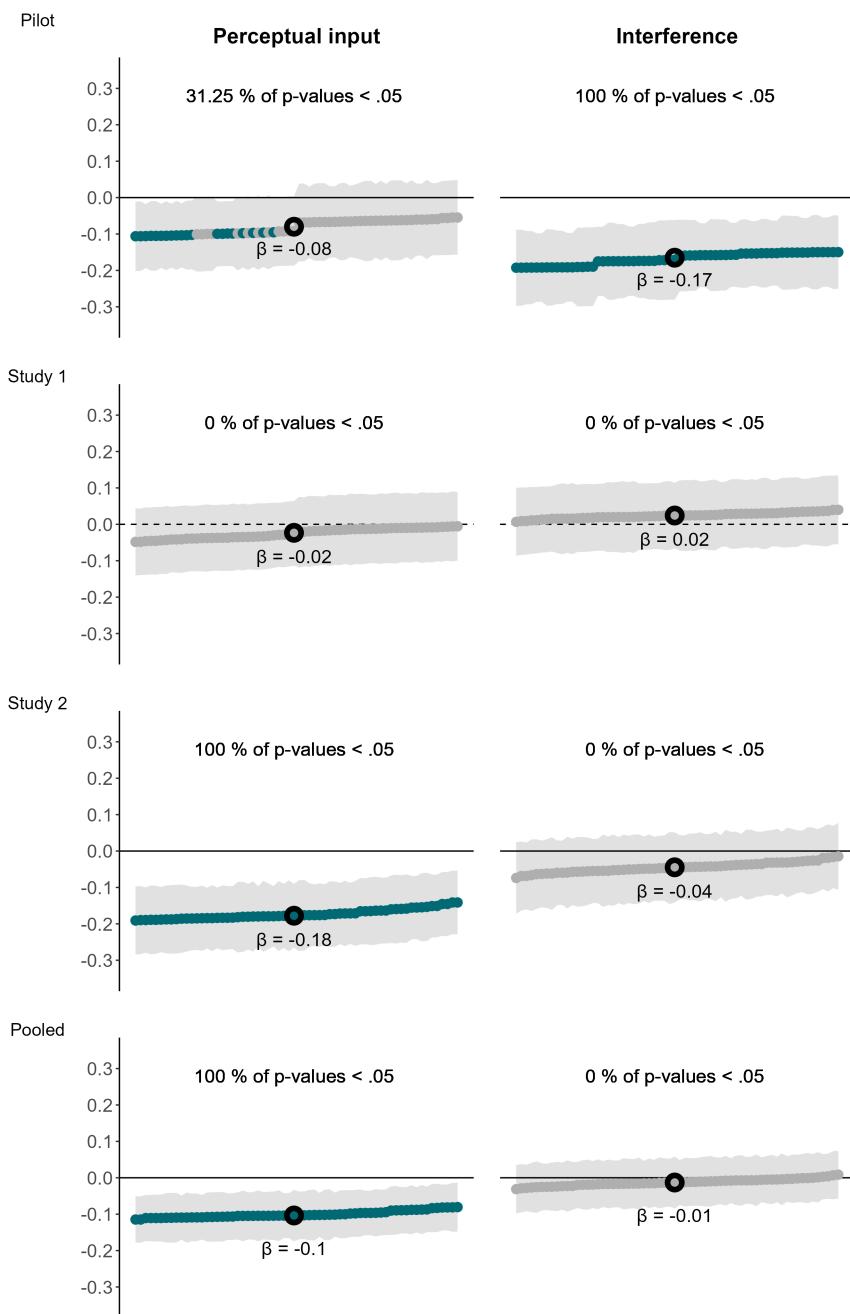


Figure 4.2. Multiverse results for the association between violence exposure with the strength of perceptual input and interference in the Flanker across all studies. Each panel depicts sorted beta coefficients across all combinations of arbitrary decisions (i.e., the effect curve across the whole multiverse). The top row depicts effect curves in the Pilot study. The second row depicts effect curves in Study 1. The third row depicts effect curves in Study 2. The Fourth row depicts effect curves of the pooled analyses across all studies.

Childhood adversity is not associated with lowered inhibition, but lower perceptual processing

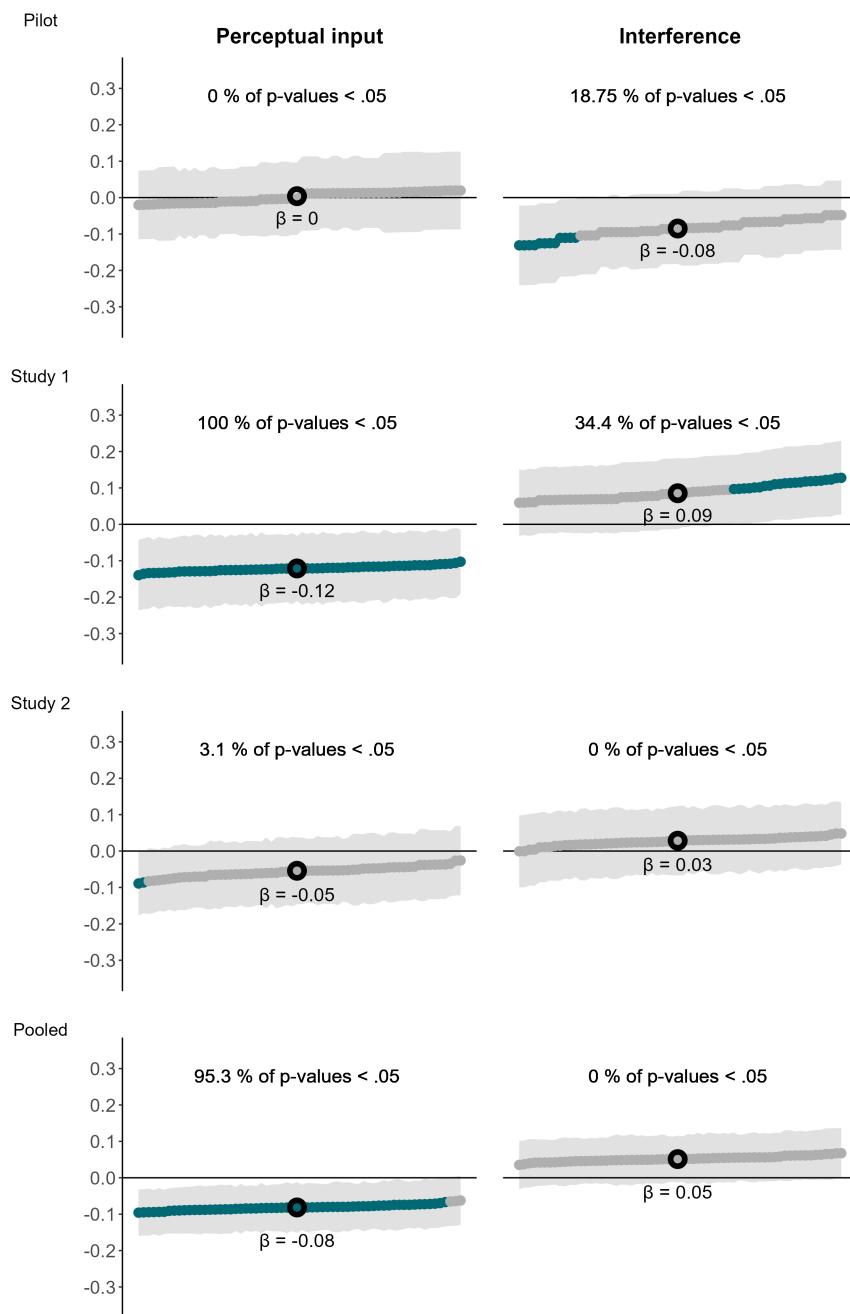


Figure 4.3. Multiverse results for the association between unpredictability with the strength of perceptual input and interference in the Flanker task across all studies. Each panel depicts sorted beta coefficients across all combinations of arbitrary decisions (i.e., the effect curve across the whole multiverse). The top row depicts effect curves in the Pilot study. The second row depicts effect curves in Study 1. The third row depicts effect curves in Study 2. The Fourth row depicts effect curves of the pooled analyses across all studies.

Within-subjects comparison of Flanker and Global-Local task information processing

There were no significant main effects for violence exposure (bootstrapped $p = .486$) nor for cognitive task (bootstrapped $p = .486$). There was a significant interaction effect ($\beta_{\text{median}} = 0.15$, 95% CI = [0.08, 0.21], 100.00 % of $ps < .05$, bootstrapped $p < .001$) (See Figure 4.4). A simple slopes analysis revealed that people with higher levels of violence exposure showed lower strength of perceptual input in the Flanker task ($b = -0.17$, 100.00% of $ps < .05$), and showed a more global versus local processing style in the Global-Local task ($b = 0.13$, 92.19% of $ps < .05$).

There was no significant main effect for unpredictability (bootstrapped $p = .414$). However, there was a significant interaction effect ($\beta_{\text{median}} = 0.08$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.14], 67.19 % of $ps < .05$, bootstrapped $p = .044$). A simple slopes analysis revealed that people with higher levels of unpredictability did not differ in their strength of perceptual input in the Flanker task ($b = -0.05$, 3.12 % of $ps < .05$), but showed a more global versus local processing style in the Global-Local task ($b = 0.09$, 34.38% of $ps < .05$).

To sum up, Study 2 provided additional support for the basic finding that violence exposure and unpredictability were associated with lower strength of perceptual input but not with differences in interference; with the caveat that the associations for unpredictability only showed up in pooled analyses. People with more exposure to violence and unpredictability also processed information more slowly in the Global-Local task. In line with our expectations, childhood exposure to violence was associated with both lowered strength of perceptual input and a more holistic processing style. The same processing style was observed for participants with more exposure to unpredictability, although they did not show lowered strength of perceptual input.

4.5 Exploratory analyses

We hypothesized that the potential adaptive benefits of a more diffuse scope of attention in adverse conditions might be linked to the notion of a *present-oriented attention style* (Frankenhuis et al., 2016; Van Gelder & Frankenhuis, 2024). People with a present-oriented attention style (versus a more future-oriented attention style) are more geared towards processing information that is relevant for solving challenges and obtaining rewards in the here-and-now. A general tendency to be more attuned to the present (while disregarding the future) is sometimes referred to as a short-term mindset (Kübel et al., 2023; Van Gelder & Frankenhuis, 2024), which also includes tendencies to be more impulsive, to more steeply discount future rewards, and to be more sensation-seeking. Although short-term mindsets are associated with exposure to adversity (Ganschow et al., 2023), it is unclear how they are associated with performance on attention tasks. We explored bivariate correlations pooled across all studies between two indicators of short-term mindsets (impulsivity and future orientation) and SSP parameters of the Flanker task (for more information on the measures, see section 1 of the supplemental materials).

Childhood adversity is not associated with lowered inhibition, but lower perceptual processing

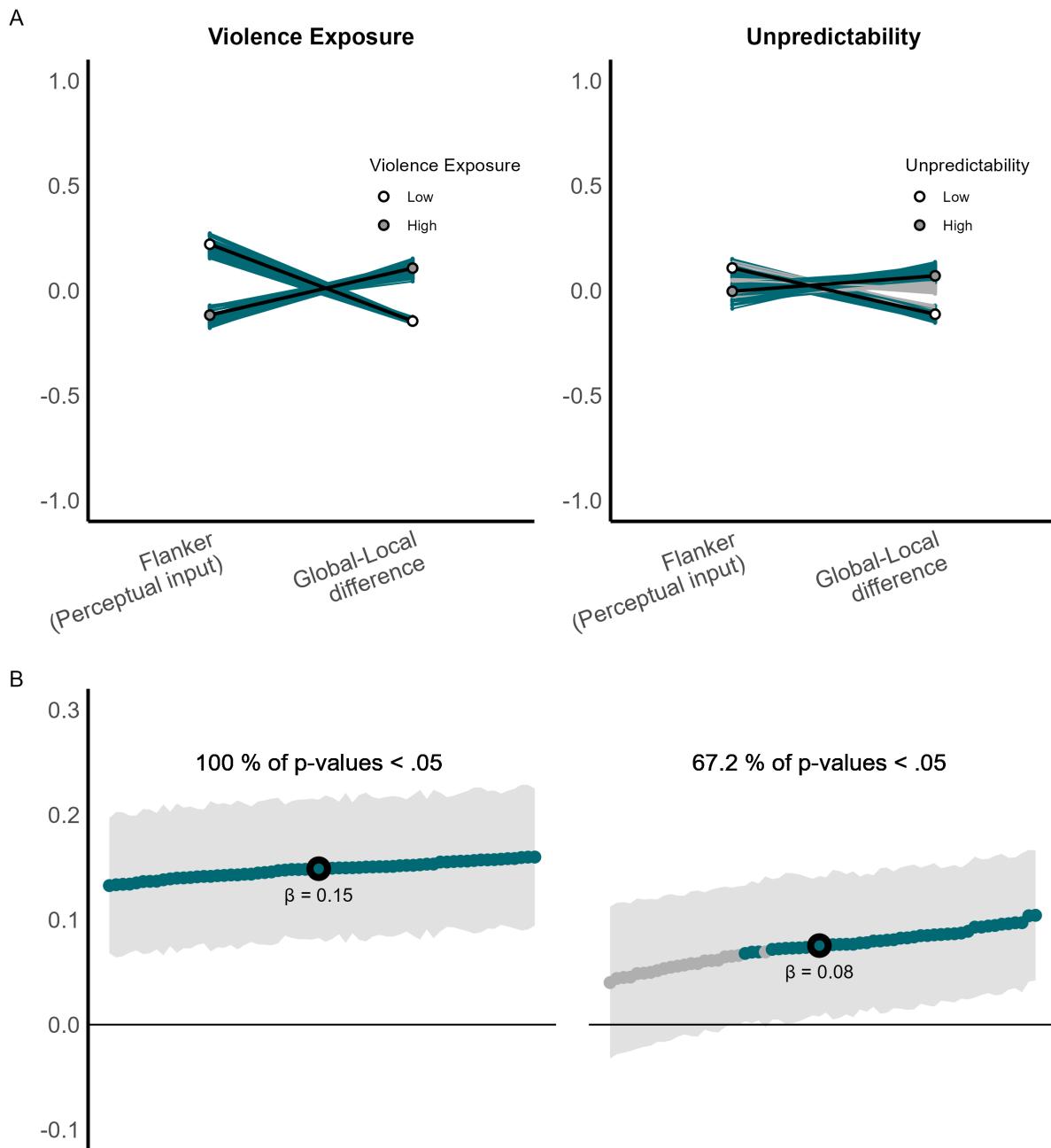


Figure 4.4. Multiverse results for the within-subjects comparison of Flanker and Global-Local task information processing. Panel A depicts the multiverse interaction effects, with the thick black lines denoting the median slope and the thin lines denoting effects for each combination of arbitrary decisions. Blue thin lines indicate significant effects ($p > .05$), and grey thin lines indicate non-significant effects ($p > .05$). Panel B depicts sorted beta coefficients across all combinations of arbitrary decisions (i.e., the effect curve across the whole multiverse). See the main text for more information about the multiverse analyses.

See Table A2.2 for an overview of the correlations. Impulsivity was negatively associated with the strength of perceptual input ($r = -.07, p = .004$) and positively associated with

interference ($r = .09, p = .005$). In addition, impulsivity was also associated with a more holistic information processing style ($r = .11, p = .020$). Thus, more impulsive participants processed information less deeply and were more easily drawn to distractions, but this might partly be explained by a holistic information processing style. Similarly, future-orientation was positively associated with perceptual input ($r = .09, p < .001$)—but not with interference ($p = .112$) —in the Flanker task, and was also associated with a more detail-oriented processing style ($r = -.12, p = .011$). Thus, more future-oriented participants processed information more deeply, which might partly be explained by a detail-oriented processing style.

4.6 General discussion

We investigated how two dimensions of childhood adversity—violence exposure and environmental unpredictability—are related to differences in how people attend to and process information. Specifically, we hypothesized that exposure to adversity might lead to a present-oriented attention style that would facilitate rapidly detecting novel or changing information, yet which would interfere with ignoring distractors. Across one Pilot study and two main studies, we tested how adversity was associated with performance on different attention tasks. The Pilot study compared performance on a Cued Attention task, Change Detection task, and a Flanker task. Two follow-up studies focused in the Flanker task, with Study 2 also including a Global-Local task. We leveraged DDM to estimate the processes underlying lowered and improved performance. This allowed us to investigate whether performance differences were associated with abilities that are typically the main focus when using these tasks (i.e., attention orientation, interference control, information accumulation), or with other processes (e.g., stimulus encoding, response execution, response caution). Across all confirmatory and exploratory analyses, we leveraged multiverse analysis to systematically assess the robustness of our findings against several uncontrollable aspects of the online assessment (e.g., distractions, fullscreen exits).

Main insights

We found little to no support for the presence of a present-oriented attention style in people exposed to adversity. More childhood exposure to violence was associated with slower processing of subtle changes in the Change Detection task and lower quality of perceptual input in the Flanker task. It was not associated with speed of processing of peripheral information in the Cued Attention task. Zooming in in the Flanker task, our two main studies found mixed evidence for the hypotheses that violence exposure and unpredictability were associated with lower strength of perceptual input. This mixed evidence suggests that people with more exposure to these adversities process information less deeply, leading to slower responses on congruent and incongruent trials in equal measure.

which would affect both the processing of distractor and target information, making it more difficult to make judgments about target and distractor information in equal measure. This was corroborated by the pooled analyses across studies, which found that both

exposure to violence and unpredictability were associated with lower strength of perceptual input, but not with differences in the ability to inhibit distractors. This finding contradicts the standard deficit interpretation of lowered performance on inhibition tasks by people with more adversity exposure (discussed below). In addition, lowered strength of perceptual input was associated with a holistic processing style. Thus, we did not find evidence that people with more violence exposure have more difficulties with inhibiting task-irrelevant information.

Our findings of the DDM decomposition of Flanker task performance challenge previous interpretations based on raw performance. Previous studies have found that people exposed to adversity and/or low SES backgrounds have longer RTs on incongruent trials relative to congruent trials (Farah et al., 2006; Fields et al., 2021; Mezzacappa, 2004; Mittal et al., 2015; Noble et al., 2005), which is commonly interpreted as an impaired ability to inhibit irrelevant information. This fits with adaptive hypotheses, as inhibition is assumed to be useful mostly in stable and predictable environment that afford long-term goal pursuit, but can be costly in unpredictable and potentially dangerous environments (Daly & Wilson, 2005; Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015). Contrary to previous studies, we found little to no evidence for performance differences on the basis of raw RTs. In addition, our DDM analyses showed that performance differences in the Flanker task are not driven by differences in interference control, but by more basic processes that are not typically considered when interpreting Flanker task performance. Although we are not aware of similar findings in the literature on adversity, comparable conclusions have recently been drawn in research on cognitive functioning related to depression and autism (Grange & Rydon-Grange, 2022; Merkt et al., 2013; Poole et al., 2023).

Our findings align with a broader literature that is critical of the validity of the Flanker task in particular, and that of cognitive control tasks more generally. As noted, several studies have failed to find coherent correlations between raw performance on different cognitive control tasks (e.g., Löffler et al., 2024; Rey-Mermet et al., 2019; Rouder & Haaf, 2019; Stahl et al., 2014). For example, previous research comparing several cognitive control tasks across different data sets using cognitive modeling found that shared variance between these tasks was mostly associated with processing speed and strategies (e.g., speed-accuracy trade-offs) (Hedge et al., 2022). Moreover, the modeling parameters reflecting conflict processing (similar to interference in our study) were barely correlated. Similarly, previous work has shown that individual differences on common EF tasks—among which the Flanker task—can be fully accounted for by general processing speed (Löffler et al., 2024). This literature, together with the findings reported here, underscore that researchers should be cautious when drawing inferences about cognitive control abilities in people exposed to adversity based on raw RTs and performance on individual tasks.

Finally, we showed that people exposed to adversity had a more holistic processing style, and that this style was associated with lower strength of perceptual input in the

Flanker task. This could mean that people with more adversity exposure processed the Flanker task display more holistically; that is, focused less on individual arrows and more on the collection of arrows as a whole. One (tentative) interpretation is that in the absence of threatening or otherwise salient information, people with more exposure to adversity attend to and process information in the environment globally and less deeply. They might only shift to local processing of a single source of information if it seems threatening or otherwise salient (Schwabe et al., 2013; Shields et al., 2015). This would be consistent with research showing that growing up in a disadvantaged environment decreases the efficiency of the brain's (resting-state) salience network, which is in turn associated with lower raw performance on certain cognitive tasks (Cermakova et al., 2023; Gellci et al., 2019; Hilger et al., 2017; Yuan et al., 2012). This research also shows that in situations of acute stress, mental resources are reallocated to this salience network, increasing vigilance and facilitating adequate responding. Indeed, a few studies show that cognitive abilities that may be particularly relevant in adverse contexts—such as attention shifting and working memory updating—may be enhanced in people from adversity when they experience acute stress (Mittal et al., 2015; Young et al., 2018).

We did not control for (potentially) confounding variables in our models, even though variables like education, intelligence, and current adversity exposure generally correlate with both childhood adversity exposure and performance on the Flanker task. Our reason for not including them as covariates was that all these factors can be reasonably seen as mediators of the association between childhood adversity and cognitive performance. However, they are unlikely (or even impossible) causes of childhood adversity. Therefore, adjusting for these variables could have introduced bias to our estimation of the total effect of childhood adversity on performance (which was our estimand) (Rohrer, 2018). That said, one way in which our analyses may have been confounded is by using retrospective measures of adversity. For example, some work suggests that current psychopathology may bias retrospective reports of childhood adversity, although the causal pathways are still mostly unclear (Francis et al., 2023; Goltermann et al., 2023; Nivison et al., 2021; Patten et al., 2015). Systematic investigations into potential confounders will ultimately improve our understanding of the effects of early adversity (Ning et al., 2023).

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

Our study has three main strengths. First, each study included socioeconomically diverse participants. Second, the DDM allowed us to decompose performance in a more nuanced way than is possible with (typically used) raw performance scores. Third, the multiverse analyses provided a systematic overview of the robustness of our findings under different analytical decisions. Our study has three main limitations. First, all experiments were conducted online, which reduced control over people's testing environment, equipment, and behavior. Indeed, our results were the least robust against participants who skipped the screen-scaling procedure (to ensure the stimuli were adequately sized) and interruptions during the tasks, which are factors that are largely out of our control. Second, we deviated from our preregistrations in several ways in all studies, due to progressive insight. This

decreased the severity of our statistical tests, and so this work would benefit from preregistered replications (Lakens, 2023).

Our findings suggest two main directions for future research. First, future studies could replicate and expand upon our finding that lower quality of information processing in people exposed to adversity is associated with a more holistic processing style. For example, future work could investigate whether people with more adversity exposure shift from holistic to a detail-oriented processing in situations of acute stress or otherwise salient information. Second, our results suggest that lower strength of perceptual input is likely the result of both processing styles, as well as of slower general processing. Future research could try to tease apart these sources using a within-subjects design simultaneously measuring inhibition, processing styles, and basic processing speed. Third, some research suggests that inhibition is not a unitary construct, instead distinguishing between response inhibition (which involves suppressing a prepotent response) and cognitive inhibition (which involves selective attention in the presence of distractors). Exposure to adversity might shape these two types of inhibition in different ways. For example, acute stress might impair performance on tasks of cognitive inhibition (of which the Flanker task is an example) and enhances performance on tasks of response inhibition (for a meta-analysis, see Shields et al., 2016; but see Dang, 2017). Future work could assess inhibition more broadly, e.g., by including tasks that are hypothesized to require cognitive or response inhibition.

4.7 General conclusion

We found that people with more childhood adversity exposure perform worse in the Flanker task not because of an impairment in their ability to inhibit distracting information, but because of lower strength of perceptual input. Our results suggest that people with more adversity exposure are not worse at inhibiting distractions; rather, they do not seem to process information in the environment deeply unless it proves to be a reliable and important source of information. These findings challenge dominant interpretations, which infer an inhibition deficit from lowered performance. This is an important difference not just for theory development, but also for future interventions aimed at closing performance gaps. For example, when applied to school contexts, interventions based on an inhibition interpretation would focus on the learning environment, perhaps removing things from the classroom that could be distracting. In contrast, an intervention based on an information processing interpretation might instead focus on increasing the apparent relevance of the learning materials, perhaps by providing more repetition or by making the content more ecologically relevant (Young et al., 2022). Thus, cognitive modeling can offer crucial insights for our understanding of cognitive abilities in adverse conditions.

Chapter 5. Inconclusive evidence for associations between adverse experiences in adulthood and working memory performance

This chapter is based on

Vermeent, S., Schubert, A.-L., DeJoseph, M.L., Denissen, J.J.A., van Gelder, J.-L., & Franken-huis, W.E. (2025). Inconclusive evidence for associations between adverse experiences in adulthood and working memory performance. *Royal Society Open Science*, 11, 241837. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.241837>

2.0 Abstract

Decades of research show that adversity tends to be associated with lower working memory (WM) performance. This literature has mainly focused on impairments in the capacity to hold information available in WM for further processing. However, recent adaptation-based studies suggest that certain types of adversity can leave intact, or even enhance, the ability to update information in WM. One challenge is that WM capacity and updating tasks tend to covary. Estimating the associations between adversity and different processes in WM requires isolating variance in performance related to WM capacity from variance in performance related to updating ability. In this Registered Report, participants from the Dutch Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel completed two tasks measuring WM capacity and one task measuring both binding and updating of information. We measured participants' exposure to neighborhood threat, deprivation, and unpredictability. We estimated associations between adversity and latent estimates of WM capacity and updating using structural equation modeling. We did not find associations between adversity and WM capacity or updating, nor did we find evidence that the associations were practically equivalent to zero. Our results show that adversity researchers should account for overlap in WM tasks when estimating specific WM abilities.

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Author contributions

All authors were involved in conceptualizing the study. SV coordinated the data collection and analyzed the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors provided feedback on the manuscript.

5.1 Introduction

Living in adverse conditions, with prolonged exposure to intense stress, tends to have a profound and enduring impact on cognitive functioning (Farah et al., 2006; Sheridan et al., 2022; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014). Although adversity can be described in many ways, we follow contemporary models focusing on threat, deprivation, and unpredictability as key dimensions of adversity (Ellis et al., 2009, 2022; McLaughlin et al., 2021; McLaughlin & Sheridan, 2016). A domain that seems to be particularly affected by adversity is working memory (WM). WM is a system for mentally building, maintaining, and updating immediately relevant information (Oberauer et al., 2018). Performance on WM tasks is associated with a host of social and cognitive abilities, such as math (Peng & Fuchs, 2016), reading (Chiappe et al., 2000), learning (Cowan, 2014), general intelligence (Conway et al., 2003), and mentalizing (Mutter et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, then, deficits in WM have negative consequences for both educational and professional outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2018; Alloway & Alloway, 2010; Guo et al., 2020; Spiegel et al., 2021). Decades of research show that adversity is generally negatively associated with performance on WM tasks (Goodman et al., 2019). However, emerging evidence suggests that specific aspects of WM might remain intact or even be enhanced through developmental adaptations to adversity. So far, the literature has tended to focus on related, but different aspects of WM in isolation, limiting a fuller integration. Here, we take a psychometric modeling approach to simultaneously examine potential decreases and enhancements in two WM components: capacity and updating.

Deficit-based and adaptation-based models

A large literature has shown negative associations between exposures to adversity and performance on WM tasks (Farah et al., 2006; Sheridan et al., 2022; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014). These associations may be potentially attributable to the enduring influence of stress on several key brain regions that support WM (Duval et al., 2017; Hanson et al., 2012). Much of this work has focused on WM capacity, or the ability to keep multiple pieces of information simultaneously available for further processing. For early-life adversity, this negative association is already present during childhood, and persists into adulthood (Bos et al., 2009; Evans & Schamberg, 2009; Farah et al., 2006; Goodman et al., 2019; Hackman et al., 2010; Noble et al., 2007; but see Nweze et al., 2021). Studies with college students have found a link between both recent and lifetime experiences of stressful major life events (discrete negative events that have a clear onset and offset, unlike chronic adversity) with lower WM capacity (Klein & Boals, 2001; Shields et al., 2017, 2019).

The most common tasks used to examine the negative association between adversity and WM are simple span tasks (repeating a string of stimuli of increasing length), complex span tasks (remembering a string of stimuli while being engaged by a secondary task), and n -back tasks (judging whether the current stimulus in a string is identical to the stimulus n steps ago) (Goodman et al., 2019). Performance on these tasks is assessed through the number of items that participants can retain in WM, that is, their overall capacity (with the

exception of *n*-back; for concerns about the construct validity of this task, see Frost et al., 2021; Kane et al., 2007).

Although both early-life and recent adversity appear to be negatively associated with WM capacity, a small set of studies suggest that exposure to adversity may leave intact, or even enhance, the ability to update items in WM in adolescents (Young et al., 2022) and adults (Young et al., 2018). Updating is defined as the ability to rapidly replace old information in WM with new information. The finding that updating may be left intact or even enhanced after exposure to adversity exemplifies emerging theoretical frameworks grounded in adaptive reasoning that are complementary to deficit frameworks (Ellis et al., 2017, 2022; Frankenhuys, Young, et al., 2020; Frankenhuys & Weerth, 2013).

Adaptation-based theories assume that developmental processes tailor an individual's cognitive abilities to the unique challenges and opportunities posed by their environment. The link between adversity and cognitive abilities is further assumed to be specific; as different types of adversity (e.g., threat vs. deprivation) pose different challenges, they should (at least in part) shape cognitive abilities in different ways. For example, with regards to executive functioning, some previous studies have found that children and adults with more exposure to unpredictability (characterized by random variation in adversity exposure over space or time) and threat tend to be better at rapidly shifting their attention between tasks (Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015; Steudte-Schmiedgen et al., 2014; Young et al., 2022; but see Nweze et al., 2021). WM updating may be especially adaptive in unpredictable environments. WM updating allows people to maintain an up-to-date overview of the (changing) current state of the environment (Young et al., 2018). Additionally, improved WM updating performance has also been documented for threat exposure (Young et al., 2022). An enhanced WM updating ability could facilitate keeping track of and integrating signals that may potentially signal acutely threatening situations.

Associations between WM capacity and updating

With deficit theories focusing on WM capacity and adaptation-based theories on WM updating, we may wonder how capacity and updating are related to each other. Performance on tasks measuring WM capacity and updating tend to be substantially correlated (in the range of .20-.50; Frischkorn et al., 2022; Löffler et al., 2024). This overlap appears to stem from shared demands of both types of tasks, in particular the need to create and maintain arbitrary bindings (Gruszka & Nęcka, 2017; Oberauer, 2009; Wilhelm et al., 2013). The term *binding* refers to the process of mapping memory items to specific positions in WM (e.g., serial, spatial, or temporal positions, depending on the task) (Oberauer, 2009; Oberauer & Lewandowsky, 2019). For example, on most WM tasks, correct recall of memory items depends on remembering them in their correct serial position, or in relation to the location where they were presented.

The centrality of binding in WM is supported by theoretical models of WM and by empirical work showing that (latent) WM capacity is strongly related to the ability to maintain

bindings (Oberauer et al., 2000; Oberauer, 2005, 2009; Oberauer & Lewandowsky, 2019; Wilhelm et al., 2013). The number of bindings a person can create and maintain in WM might be the main limiting factor in WM capacity, as maintaining several bindings at the same time will increasingly lead to interference between them (Gruszka & Nęcka, 2017; Oberauer, 2009; Wilhelm et al., 2013). This upper limit on WM capacity also affects performance on WM updating tasks. That is, updating items in WM requires not just dissolving old bindings and creating new ones, but also maintaining bindings of items that should not be updated. Thus, the overlap in performance on WM updating and capacity tasks likely stems from the need in both types of tasks to create and maintain bindings in WM (Ecker et al., 2010; Frischkorn et al., 2022; Oberauer et al., 2000; Schmiedek et al., 2009; Wilhelm et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, WM updating tasks additionally require the updating of established bindings, which sets them apart from WM capacity tasks (Ecker et al., 2010; Frischkorn et al., 2022). Different updating tasks require different combinations of retrieval (making information available for immediate processing), transformation (changing a prior value into a new one, e.g., by addition or subtraction), and substitution (replacing a prior value for a new value) (Ecker et al., 2010). Ecker et al. (2010) included three measures of WM capacity as well as eight versions of a WM updating measure that required different combinations of retrieval, transformation, and substitution. After accounting for overall updating accuracy (which was positively correlated with WM capacity), they found positive correlations of around .50 between WM capacity with latent estimates of retrieval and transformation accuracy, but not with a latent estimate of substitution accuracy. Thus, when the ability to accurately substitute old with new information—a key aspect of WM updating—is sufficiently isolated from WM capacity using latent modeling, capacity and updating seem to be independent components of WM.

These findings underscore the importance of accounting for WM capacity when assessing a person's WM updating ability. This is especially important in the context of adversity research, as previous studies suggest that certain types of adverse conditions might have opposing effects on WM capacity and updating (e.g., Goodman et al., 2019; Young et al., 2018, 2022). Yet, to our knowledge, no previous research has analyzed both abilities within a single statistical model. This could lead to (1) an underestimation of the extent to which adversity undermines WM capacity, and (2) underestimation of the extent to which adversity can enhance WM updating. This, in turn, has implications for basic and applied science. For basic science, it could bias inferences about individual differences in performance on WM tasks, especially when the negative association between adversity and WM capacity is stronger than the positive association with WM updating. For applied science, it could hide from view potential pathways to leverage people's existing strengths in school or work contexts.

Current study

In this study, we estimated associations between latent estimates of WM capacity and updating with three types of adversity: threat, deprivation, and unpredictability. Together, these adversity types capture key dimensions in contemporary models of adversity (Ellis et al., 2009, 2022; McLaughlin et al., 2021; McLaughlin & Sheridan, 2016). Threat refers to experiences involving the potential for harm imposed by others. We focused on perceived neighborhood violence, the extent to which an individual reports having been exposed to acts of violence in their neighborhood. Deprivation refers to having a low level of resources. We focused on perceived material deprivation, a (perceived) lack of access to material resources. Unpredictability refers to variation in material deprivation over time. This definition is inspired by, but deviates from the harshness-unpredictability framework, in which unpredictability is defined as stochastic variation in harshness (age-specific rates in morbidity and mortality) over space and time (Ellis et al., 2009, 2022). We did not calculate unpredictability in neighborhood threat given that participants had at most six time-points, and often as few as one or two, which is insufficient to calculate variation over time (Walasek et al., 2024).

We addressed three research questions. First, what is the association between adversity and WM capacity? Second, what is the association between adversity and WM updating *after* accounting for WM capacity? Third, are the directions and strengths of these associations similar or different for neighborhood threat, material deprivation, and unpredictability?

We evaluated evidence for deficit- and adaptation-based frameworks (see Figure 5.1A for a visual summary). Crucially, as deficit and adaptation processes can operate in concert (Frankenhuis, Young, et al., 2020), we could find support (or lack thereof) for both frameworks in the same model. We distinguished between three between-person data patterns: (1) lower performance, (2) higher performance, and (3) practically equivalent performance. We defined lower performance as a statistically significant negative association between a type of adversity and WM capacity or updating (irrespective of effect size). We defined higher performance as a statistically significant positive association between a type of adversity and WM capacity or updating (irrespective of effect size). We defined practically equivalent performance as an association between a type of adversity and WM capacity or updating that has a standardized effect smaller than 0.1 *and* larger than -0.1—even if the effect is statistically different from zero—which we tested using Two One-Sided T-Tests (TOST) equivalence testing (see the ‘Primary analyses’ section; Lakens et al., 2018).

Deficit frameworks predict a negative association between all three types of adversity and WM capacity as well as WM updating. This follows from the hypothesis that adversity leads to broad WM deficits (Farah et al., 2006; Sheridan et al., 2020). Deficit frameworks

are partially supported if we find negative associations with only one (or two) types of adversity.

Within adaptation-based frameworks, theories make two predictions. First, if adaptive processes enhance WM updating and there are no impairment processes operating, we can expect a positive association between adversity and WM updating. Second, if, adaptive processes operate in concert with general impairment processes, we can expect practically equivalent WM updating performance in combination with lower WM capacity. If neither impairment nor adaptative processes are operating, we can expect both WM updating and capacity to be practically equivalent.

We also had two expectations based on prior studies. First, we expected the association between material deprivation and WM capacity to be more negative than the associations with unpredictability and neighborhood threat. This follows from findings showing that cognitive abilities are more negatively associated with cognitive deprivation than threat (Salhi et al., 2021; Sheridan et al., 2020). Although cognitive and material deprivation are distinct types of deprivation, they tend to be correlated, and are both associated with limited access to resources that stimulate cognitive development and functioning (Bradley et al., 2001; Lurie et al., 2024; Rosen et al., 2019). Therefore, we expected that their associations with WM would have comparable effect sizes. Second, researchers have hypothesized that WM updating is particularly adaptive in unpredictable and threatening environments, as it facilitates keeping track of unpredictable changes and sudden threats. Therefore, we expected WM updating to be associated with unpredictability and neighborhood threat, but not with material deprivation (Young et al., 2018; but see Young et al., 2022).

5.2 Methods

Participants

Our study included 800 participant who were randomly sampled from the Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel (Scherpenzeel, 2011). The LISS panel is a representative probability sample of roughly 5,000 Dutch households (~7,500 individuals) drawn from the population register by Statistics Netherlands on an invite-only basis. Households without a computer or internet connection are provided with these facilities by LISS. Each year, participants complete the same core battery of questionnaires about—among other topics—their financial situation in the past year. In addition, participants can complete additional online questionnaires every month, with variable content. The current study integrated two data sources. First, our sample of 800 participants participated in a new LISS study between October 2023 and February 2024 (hereafter referred to as ‘newly collected data’), in which we included a measure of neighborhood threat and multiple measures of working memory. Second, we accessed data that were previously collected in LISS (hereafter referred to as ‘the LISS archive’). See Figure 5.2 for a visual overview

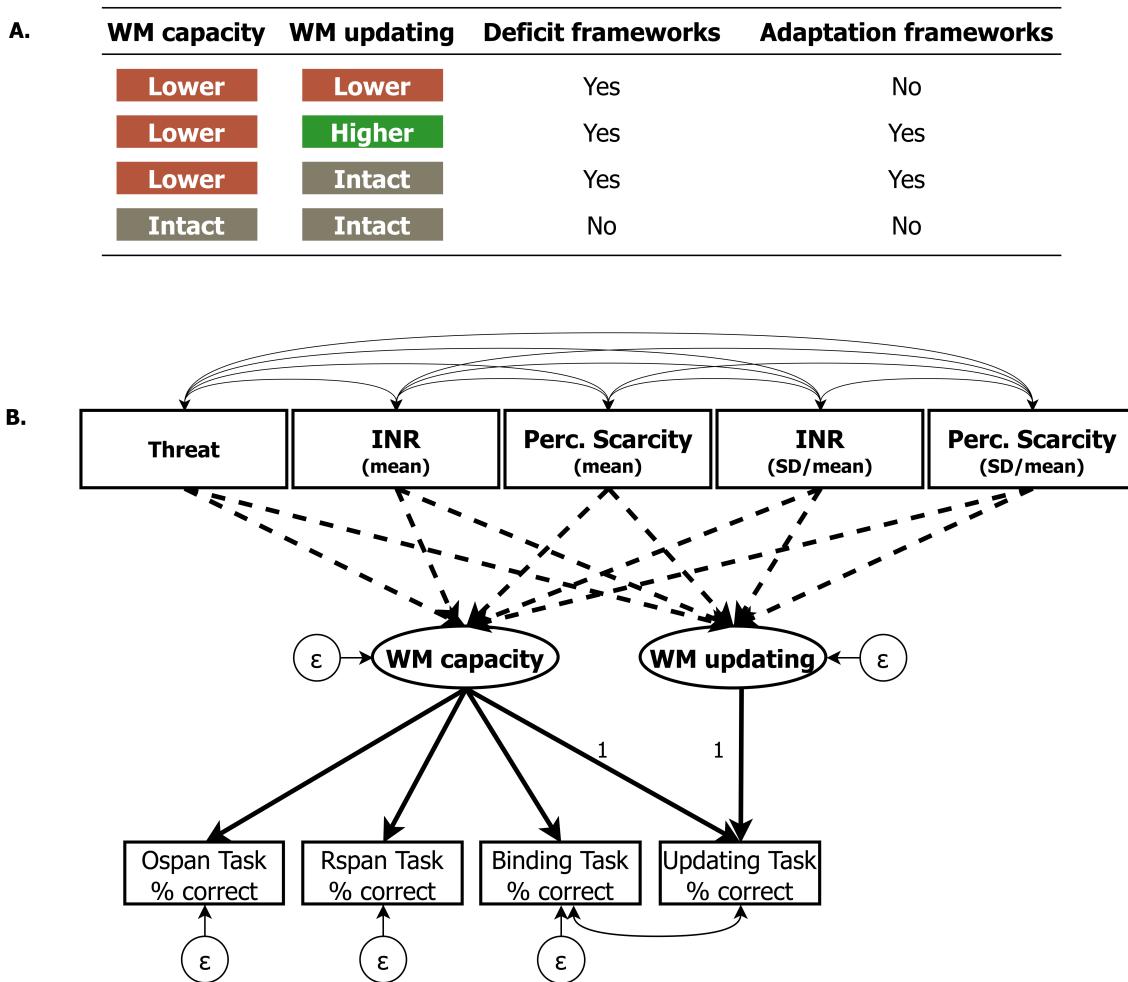


Figure 5.1. Overview of predictions derived from deficit and adaptation frameworks. Panel A depicts the most likely between-person data patterns based on previous literature, and whether we would consider them consistent with deficit and adaptation frameworks (see the main text for more details). Panel B depicts an overview of the preregistered Structural Equation Model. Note that this model differs slightly from the final model (see Figure 5.4). Ellipses represent latent variables, rectangles represent manifest variables, and circles represent residual variances. Unidirectional solid lines represent factor loadings, bidirectional solid lines represent covariances, and dashed lines represent regression paths. All four manifest WM measures loaded on a latent WM capacity factor, reflecting the fact that people have to hold information active in WM on all tasks. We fixed the loading of WM capacity on the Binding Task to 1, reflecting the idea that the ability to create and maintain bindings is the main limiting factor in WM capacity (Gruszka & Nęcka, 2017; Oberauer, 2009; Wilhelm et al., 2013). WM updating was modeled as a latent factor capturing the residual variance in the updating task after accounting for variance related to WM capacity. INR = income-to-needs ratio; Perc. Scarcity = perceived scarcity; SD = standard deviation.

of the data sources and their measurement timepoints. We signed a contract with LISS stipulating that we would receive access to the newly collected data only after Stage 1 acceptance of this Registered Report.

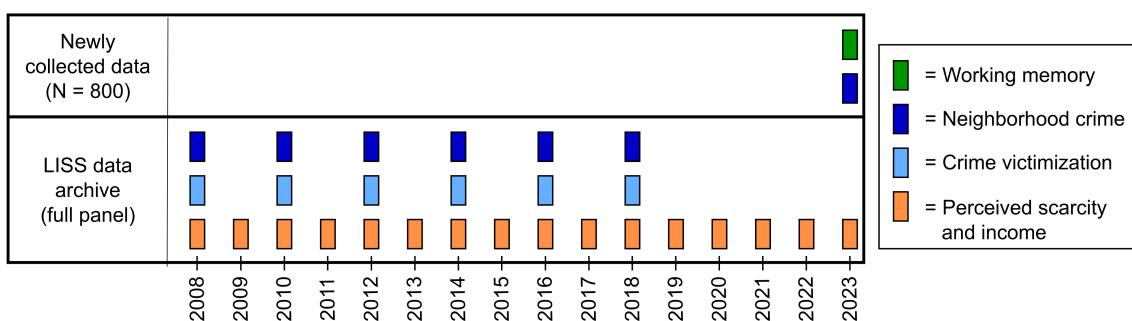


Figure 5.2. Overview of the different data sources used in this study. We distinguished between measures taken from the LISS data archive and measures that were newly collected in our own study between October 2023 and February 2024. Perceived scarcity and income were collected yearly in the full panel from 2008 – 2023. Neighborhood crime and crime victimization were collected across six waves between 2008 and 2018. In the newly collected data, we collected data on a measure of neighborhood threat and multiple measures of working memory. Note that participants did not have data across all timepoints of the archived studies because they joined the LISS panel more recently or because they did not participate in each wave.

We based our power analysis on simulations reported by Kretzschmar & Gignac (2019), determining the required sample size to detect a small effect size ($\beta = 0.1$) with at least 90% power at $\alpha = 0.05$. Assuming a reliability of at least 0.7 (which is typical for WM tasks with a number of trials similar to ours; e.g., Wilhelm et al., 2013), we required a sample size of $N = 730$. Anticipating some exclusions, we decided to include 800 participants. Participants were eligible for inclusion if they 1) were currently between 18 and 55 years old, 2) had completed at least one wave of an archived longitudinal LISS study containing measures that we use to operationalize crime neighborhood threat (see below), and 3) had given permission to link their LISS data to government microdata (not relevant here).

To ensure sufficient representation of people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, half the total sample was sampled from participants who reported one or more of the following at least once in the three years: (1) a monthly income $< €1,500$, (2) HAVO or VWO as highest completed education (which are the two highest levels in Dutch secondary education), or (3) a score of 4 or lower on the 'ladder of life' ("If you imagine a 'ladder of life', where the first step represents the worst possible life, and the tenth (top) step the best possible life, on what step would you place yourself?"). Participants were excluded if they (1) switched to and interacted with other browser tabs during one or more of the cognitive tasks, (2) did not perform above chance level on the secondary processing tasks. The final sample consisted of 759 participants (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1. Descriptive statistics.

Category	Statistic
Mean age (SD)	41 (9.9)
Sex (% Female)	54.4
Highest completed education (%)	
primary school	0.5
vmbo (intermediate secondary education)	8.3
havo/vwo (higher secondary education)	9.2
mbo (intermediate vocational education)	26.4
hbo (higher vocational education)	31.5
wo (university)	22.4
other	0.5
missing	1.2
Mean number of waves (SD)	
INR	13.4 (3.9)
Perceived scarcity	11.1 (3.7)
Threat	3.5 (1.9)

Measures

All independent variables, except for the income-to-needs ratio (INR) consisted of multiple items and/or scales. If all correlations between the items/scales were equal to or larger than .60 (i.e., indicating a “strong” correlation), then we computed a uniformly weighted average. If the correlation was lower than .60, we applied Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to the averaged measures and extracted only the first principal component score. We present bivariate correlations in Table 5.2, and histograms for all independent measures in the supplemental materials.

Neighborhood threat

Perceived neighborhood crime. We included four items from the LISS archive collected across six waves (<https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-zch-j8xt>), in which participants answered how often it happens that they 1) “avoid certain areas in your place of residence because you perceive them as unsafe”, 2) “do not respond to a call at the door because you feel that it is unsafe”, 3) “leave valuable items at home to avoid theft or robbery in the street?”, 4) “make a detour, by car or on foot, to avoid unsafe areas?” on a scale of 1 (“(Almost) never”), 2 (“Sometimes”), or 3 (“Often”). We recoded these items so that 0 indicated “(Almost) never”. We then summed the responses within each wave for which participants had data, and calculated an average across the waves.

In addition, we implemented the Neighborhood Violence Scale (Frankenhuis, Young, et al., 2020; Frankenhuis & Bijlstra, 2018) in the newly collected data. The Neighborhood Violence Scale includes seven items measuring perceived exposure to neighborhood violence (e.g., “Crime is common in the neighborhood where I live”; “Where I live, it is important to be able to defend yourself against physical harm”). Participants answered these questions on a scale of 1 (“Completely disagree”) to 7 (“Completely agree”). We computed an average of the seven items.

Crime victimization. We used data from the LISS archive collected across six waves (same dataset as above), in which participants indicated whether they fell victim to eight types of crime over the two years prior to a particular wave (0 = no, 1 = yes). We included seven items concerning exposure to crime: (1) burglary or attempted burglary; (2) theft from their car; (3) theft of their wallet or purse, handbag, or other personal possession; (4) wreckage of their car or other private property; (5) intimidation by any other means; (6) maltreatment of such serious nature that it required medical attention; (7) maltreatment that did not require medical attention. We computed a variety score by summing the exposures to *unique* types of crime across all waves. Thus, if a participant reported exposure to the same type of crime on separate waves, this counted as one exposure in the total score (Sweeten, 2012).

Neighborhood threat composite. We first computed an average across time for each measure separately (i.e., the two measures of neighborhood crime and the measure of crime victimization). Because correlations were below .60 (see Table 5.2), we then used PCA to extract only the first principal component score ($R^2 = .20$). The threat component was most strongly determined by the Neighborhood Violence Scale (0.63), followed by the perceived neighborhood crime scale from the LISS archive (0.40) and crime victimization (0.18).

Material deprivation

We measured material deprivation with two separate indicators: perceived scarcity and the income-to-needs ratio.

Perceived scarcity (mean). We used a few items from the LISS archive that were collected on a yearly basis between 2008 and 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.57990/1gr4-bf42>) to index perceived scarcity. First, participants indicated how hard or easy it currently is to live off the income of their household, on a scale from 0 (very hard) to 10 (very easy). Second, participants were asked to choose which of the following best applied to their current situation: (1) “we are accumulating debt”; (2) “we are somewhat eating into savings”; (3) “we are just managing to make ends meet”; (4) “we have a little bit of money to spare”; (5) “we have a lot of money to spare”. Responses were reverse-coded, so that higher scores indicated a worse financial situation. Third, participants answered which of the following issues they were confronted with at present (0 = no, 1 = yes): (1) “having trouble making ends meet”; (2) unable to quickly replace things that break”; (3) “having

to lend money for necessary expenditures”; (4) “running behind in paying rent/mortgage or general utilities”; (5) “debt collector/bailiff at the door in the last month”; (6) “received financial support from family or friends in the last month”.

We first computed the average across time for each item separately. Because correlations were all above .60, we calculated a uniformly weighted average.

Income-to-needs (mean). We calculated an income-to-needs ratio for each year using monthly self-reported net household income from the LISS archive (<https://doi.org/10.57990/qn3k-as78>). Zero values in household income were set to missing, as these could either indicate the lack of an income or an unwillingness to disclose the income. If monthly household income is missing (or zero) for an entire year for a participant, we used, if available, the yearly net household income they reported in the LISS archive (<https://doi.org/10.57990/1gr4-bf42>), dividing it by 12 to obtain a monthly estimate. First, we divided the average income per year by the *poverty threshold*, as determined by Statistics Netherlands (Brakel et al., 2023; CBS, personal communication, December 15, 2023). As thresholds are only provided for households with up to three children, we applied the threshold of a household with three children to households with more than three children. Likewise, we applied the threshold of a household with two adults for households that contained three or more adults. Second, we calculated the average within-person income-to-needs ratio for each year by averaging across the monthly income-to-needs estimates.

Unpredictability

Perceived scarcity (SD/mean). This measure was based on the same items as outlined above (see Perceived scarcity (mean)). We computed unpredictability over time in perceived scarcity using the coefficient of variation, which is the within-person standard deviation across years divided by the mean (Key et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2022; Ugarte & Hastings, 2023; Walasek et al., 2024; Young et al., 2020). The mean and standard deviation in income have been found to be strongly positively correlated, indicating that people with lower incomes tend to experience less variability in income (Li et al., 2018; Young et al., 2024). For that reason, the standard deviation alone has been called into question as a measure of adversity, as the same fluctuation in income can have a greater relative impact for people close to the poverty line than for people with high incomes.

We first computed the standard deviation across time for each item separately. because correlations were below .60 (see Table 5.2), we then used PCA to extract only the first principal component score ($R^2 = .38$). The perceived unpredictability component was almost fully determined by the item about people’s current situation (1.00), followed by difficulties to live off income (0.34) and financial troubles (0.20).

Income-to-needs (SD/mean). Similar to perceived scarcity, we computed unpredictability over time in the income-to-needs ratio using the coefficient of variation.

Table 5.2. Spearman correlation between the main independent variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. INR (M)	-													
2. Living off income (M)	-0.52***	-												
3. Financial troubles (M)	-0.43***	0.71***	-											
4. Current situation (M)	-0.51***	0.75***	0.69***	-										
5. Perceived scarcity (M)	-0.55***	0.96***	0.79***	0.89***	-									
6. INR (CV)	-0.17***	0.15***	0.21***	0.14***	0.18***	-								
7. Living off income (CV)	0.19***	-0.20***	-0.02	-0.18***	-0.19***	0.15***	-							
8. Financial troubles (CV)	-0.36***	0.64***	0.92***	0.60***	0.71***	0.24***	0.05	-						
9. Current situation (CV)	0.20***	-0.11**	0.04	-0.11**	-0.11**	0.12**	0.34***	0.13***	-					
10. Perceived scarcity (CV)	0.21***	-0.11**	0.05	-0.16***	-0.11**	0.18***	0.35***	0.16***	1.00***	-				
11. Neighborhood safety	-0.13***	0.19***	0.16***	0.17***	0.20***	0.05	-0.10*	0.12**	-0.05	-0.05	-			
12. Neighborhood Violence Scale	-0.22***	0.26***	0.19***	0.22***	0.27***	0.02	-0.10*	0.16***	-0.06	-0.05	0.24***	-		
13. Crime victimization	0.01	0.12**	0.18***	0.16***	0.15***	0.10**	0.01	0.17***	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.12**	-	
14. Threat	-0.21***	0.29***	0.24***	0.26***	0.31***	0.07	-0.12**	0.20***	-0.06	-0.04	0.58***	0.89***	0.26***	-
Mean	1.99	4.17	1.30	2.35	2.60	0.22	0.27	0.21	0.27	-0.01	1.45	2.39	1.04	-0.02
SD	0.76	1.60	0.53	0.75	0.87	0.19	0.17	0.24	0.15	0.99	1.47	0.95	1.27	0.68
Min	0.09	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	-1.86	0.00	1.00	0.00	-1.07
Max	6.10	11.00	4.44	5.00	5.93	1.52	0.99	0.92	0.93	4.42	8.00	6.86	7.00	3.68
Skew	1.06	0.76	2.47	0.44	0.87	2.31	0.95	0.62	0.22	0.34	1.18	1.33	1.28	1.21
Kurtosis	3.42	1.39	6.86	-0.08	1.08	8.83	1.22	-1.01	0.87	1.34	1.22	2.35	1.27	2.05

Note: * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$. CV = coefficient of variance, INR = income-to-needs ratio, M = mean, Perc. Scarcity = perceived scarcity

WM tasks

The WM tasks were all part of the newly collected data. All materials and scripts for the cognitive tasks can be found at https://stefanvermeent.github.io/liss_wm_profiles_2023/materials/README.html. Prior to collecting LISS data, we conducted a pilot study among in a Dutch sample ($N = 100$) through Prolific Academic. The main goals of this pilot study were to collect participant feedback (e.g., difficulty of instructions, whether we included sufficient breaks) and to analyze performance and correlations between tasks. The results of this pilot study are described in more detail in the Supplemental Materials https://stefanvermeent.github.io/liss_wm_profiles_2023/supplement/README.html.

Operation Span Task. The Operation Span Task (Figure 5.3A) is a common measure of WM capacity (Conway et al., 2005; Wilhelm et al., 2013). In this task, participants alternate between a primary memorization task and a secondary processing task. On each trial, the task is to memorize a sequence of letters in the correct order (from a set of 12 letters). Each letter is presented for 1,000 ms in the center of the screen. Next, participants see a simple mathematical equation including the outcome. Their task is to indicate whether the outcome is correct or incorrect by pressing either the 'a' or 'l' key on their keyboard. The equations always contain one addition or subtraction, with numbers ranging between one and 10. Outcomes are always positive integers. On each trial, participants have to memorize between four and six letters, with each set size repeated three times. At the end of each sequence, all letters are presented in a 3×4 grid, and participants click the letters in the correct order.

Participants first practiced the letter task (three times), then the math task (eight times), and then the full task (three times). If they performed at or below chance, they had the opportunity to either repeat a part or advance to the next part. After practicing, participants completed 9 test trials, with a total of 45 recall items and 45 math items. We computed an operation span score by calculating the proportion of letters recalled in the correct sequential position across trials (Conway et al., 2005).

Rotation Span Task. The Rotation Span Task (Figure 5.3B) is similar to the Operation Span Task and was adopted from Wilhelm et al. (2013). On each trial, the task is to memorize the orientation of a sequence of arrows in the correct order. Arrows can take on eight different orientations, with increments of 45° . Each arrow is presented for 1,000 ms in the center of the screen. Next, participants see a capital 'G' or 'F' that is rotated at one of eight different orientations, with increments of 45° . Their task is to indicate whether the letter is mirrored or not. On each trial, participants have to memorize between two to five arrows, with each set size repeated three times. At the end of each sequence, all arrows are presented simultaneously, and participants click the arrows in the correct order.

Participants first practiced the arrow task (three times), then the letter task (eight times), and then the full task (three times). If they performed at or below chance, they

had the opportunity to either repeat a part or to advance to the next part. After practicing, participants completed 12 test trials, with a total of 45 recall items and 45 letter items. We computed a rotation span score by calculating the proportion of arrows recalled in the correct sequential position across trials (Conway et al., 2005).

Binding-Updating Task. The Binding-Updating task (Figure 5.3C) was adopted from Wilhelm et al. (2013). On each trial, participants see a 3×3 grid, with a fixation cross in the central cell. After 1,000 ms, they are presented with a sequence of numbers (0-9) in random locations of the grid. Each new number is presented for 1,500 ms, after which it disappears for 500 ms before the next number is presented. The task is to remember the last number they see in each location. Memory set sizes (i.e., the number of unique locations in the grid) ranges between three and five. On half of the trials, only one number is presented in each location. These constitute the binding trials. On the other half of the trials, some letters are presented in the same location as previous numbers, requiring mentally replacing the old number with the new number. These constitute the updating trials. We use two, three, and four updating steps, each repeated in combination with the different set sizes. At the end of the trials, participants indicate which letter they saw last in each location in random order.

Participants first completed four practice trials. If they performed at or below chance, they had the opportunity to either repeat the practice trials or to advance to the actual task. After practicing, they completed 18 test trials, of which nine were binding-only (24 recall items in total) and nine were updating trials (24 recall items in total). We computed a binding score by calculating the overall recall accuracy (%) across trials with zero updating steps. We computed an updating score by calculating the overall recall accuracy (%) across trials with one or more updating steps.

Procedure

We received ethical approval from the first author's institutional ethical board. Upon starting the study, participants were informed that the study could only be completed on a laptop or desktop PC. If they attempted to start the study on a tablet or smartphone, they were unable to advance and prompted to switch to a suitable device. Participants started with the WM tasks, which on average took between 20 and 25 minutes. The WM tasks were completed in fullscreen mode. If participants left fullscreen mode at any moment during the tasks, they saw instructions at the top of their screen that allowed them to return to fullscreen mode. The order of the WM tasks was counterbalanced, and participants had the opportunity to take breaks at regular intervals.

After the cognitive tasks, participants answered three questions about the environment in which they completed the WM tasks: 1) "How much noise was there in your environment during the memory tasks?"; 2) "Were you at any moment interrupted during the memory tasks?"; 3) "Did you at any moment during the memory tasks leave the computer?". Next, they completed questionnaires about their future orientation (not consid-

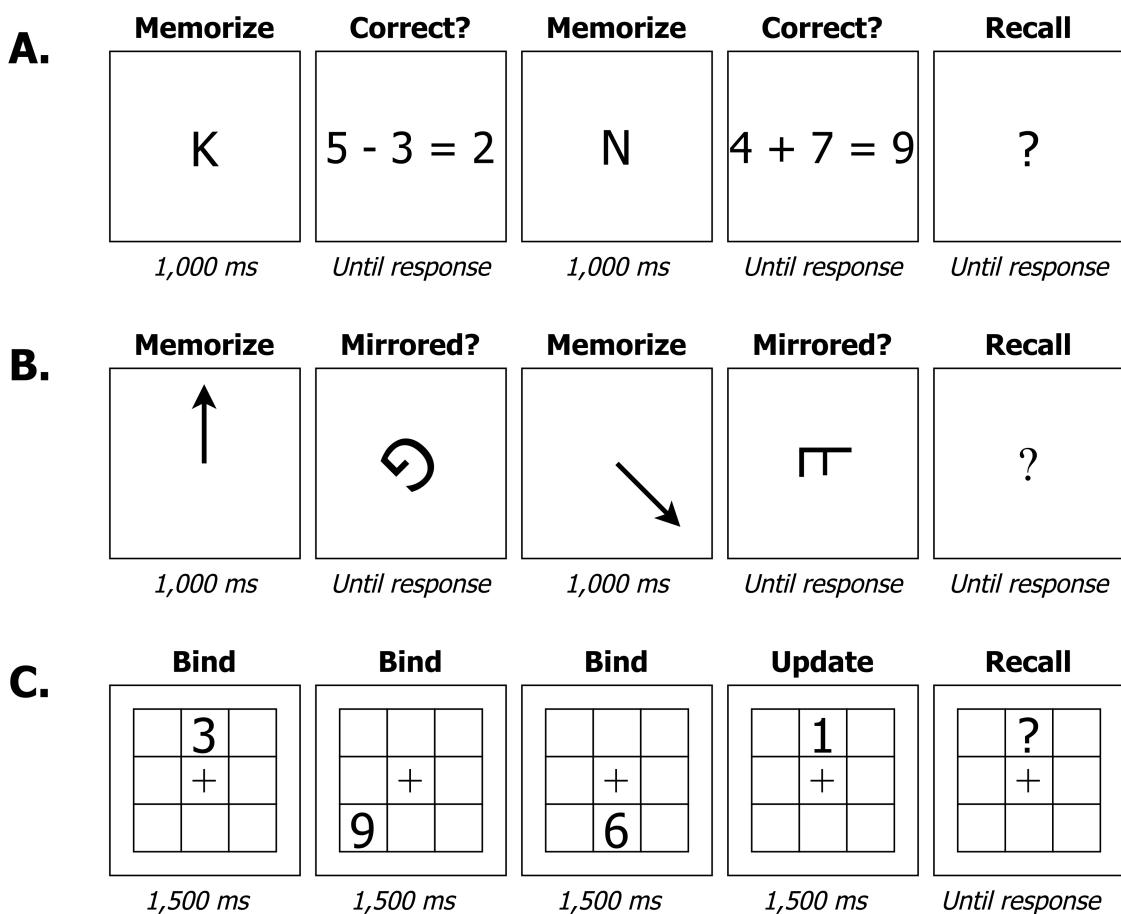


Figure 5.3. Overview of the working memory tasks. Panel A: Operation Span Task. Participants memorized letters in the correct order, while engaging in a secondary math task. Panel B: Rotation Span Task. Participants memorized the orientation of arrows, while judging whether letters were mirrored or normal in a secondary task. Panel C: Participants memorized numbers in the correct location in a 3×3 grid. On half of the trials, all numbers were presented in unique locations, only requiring binding the numbers to the correct position. On the other half, some numbers were presented in the same location as a previously presented number, requiring updating. Note: stimuli are not to scale.

ered here), personality (not considered here), past adversity exposure, and recent adversity exposure. Finally, they completed a standard set of evaluation questions asking about their experiences with the study, with the possibility to provide open-ended feedback. This part on average took 5 minutes. Participants received €7.50 for their participation through LISS. If participants experienced difficulties of any sort, they could contact the LISS helpdesk.

Proposed analysis plan

The Stage 1 protocol of this Registered Report can be found at <https://osf.io/dp7wc>.

Data access

The working memory data and one of the neighborhood threat indices were collected through October-December 2023, prior to submitting the Stage 1 protocol. These data were only made available to the first author after Stage 1 acceptance, as stipulated in a signed contract with LISS. During planning of the study, the first author accessed the LISS data archive and inspected three waves of the LISS data containing the items about neighborhood safety and crime exposure, as well as the three most recent monthly data collections containing basic demographic info. The purpose was to ascertain the number of individuals who had finished the previous waves in the LISS data archive and were presently still participating in the panel (i.e., to see if we could reasonably create a link between the LISS data archive and newly collected data).

All data access events were automatically detected and logged on the GitHub repository using the *projectlog* R package (Vermeent, 2023). We took the following measures to prevent bias: 1) we randomly shuffled the participant IDs in each data set using the *projectlog* R package, so that we were unable to link participant data between (waves of) studies in the LISS data archive; 2) we did not inspect any of the measures that will be part of our adversity composites; 3) we did not know which participants would be selected for the newly collected data; 4) the primary analyses will be based on composite measures that combine measures from the LISS data archive with measures from the newly collected data.

Primary analyses

See Figure 5.1B for an overview of the model specification. We fitted a single model containing all adversity measures using the *lavaan* R package (Rosseel, 2012). We used robust maximum likelihood estimation to account for non-normality. Missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood (FIML). We accounted for clustering within families using the *lavaan.survey* R package (Oberski, 2014).

WM capacity was estimated as a latent factor loading on all outcome measures. In addition, we estimated WM updating as a latent factor capturing residual variance in the updating measure. Thus, this factor accounted for updating-specific variance after accounting for WM capacity. We estimated the effect of each adversity type (dashed lines in Figure 5.1B) through regression analyses. Each association was controlled for: (1) age in years ; (2) the quadratic effect of age; (2) environmental noise (“How noisy was your environment during the memory tasks”, rated on a scale of 1 (very little noise) to 5 (a lot of noise)); (3) two items measuring interruptions (“Where you at any moment interrupted during the memory tasks?” and “Did you at any moment during the memory tasks leave your computer?”, rated as yes or no). Goodness of fit was assessed using the comparative fit index (CFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). CFI values $> .90$ and RMSEA values $< .08$ were interpreted as acceptable model fit, and CFI values $> .95$ and RMSEA values $\leq .06$ as good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

We anticipated that we may have to optimize the model further in case of bad model fit, and therefore planned to estimate the model in two steps to prevent bias. First, we constructed the measurement model of WM, without including the adversity measures. This step was planned to be carried out prior to accessing any of the adversity measures. Once we obtained at least acceptable model fit, we accessed and added the adversity measures to the model. This procedure was tracked and timestamped on the GitHub repository using the procedure outlined above. We controlled for multiple testing using the false discovery rate (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995; Cribbie, 2007).

To statistically test whether small effects were practically equivalent to zero we used Two One-Sided T-tests (TOST) equivalence testing (Lakens et al., 2018), using -0.1 and 0.1 as equivalence bounds. TOST equivalence testing allows us to conclude practically equivalent performance based on a significant effect, rather than erroneously interpreting a non-significant effect as evidence for the absence of an effect. We considered any effect that fell within this region to reflect practical equivalence, that is, a between-person difference in performance that is practically equivalent to zero. TOST provides two *p*-values, one testing against the upper bound and one testing against the lower bound; we report only the largest of the two *p*-values.

5.3 Results

Confirmatory analyses

Model fit

The preregistered measurement model specification did not converge. A model version excluding the covariance between manifest binding and updating did converge, but resulted in suboptimal fit (Robust CFI = 0.95, robust RMSEA = 0.12, 95% CI = [0.09, 0.14]). Modification indices indicated that model fit would improve most from estimating the covariance between Rotation Span and Operation Span, which is in line with previous factor models of working memory containing span tasks as a subset of other working memory tasks (e.g., Löffler et al., 2024). A model incorporating an estimate of this covariance provided a good fit to the data (Robust CFI = 1, robust RMSEA = 0, 95% CI = [0, 0]). After finalizing the measurement model, we constructed the final structural model by adding all predictors and covariates to the model, which resulted in a good model fit (Robust CFI = 0.99, robust RMSEA = 0.03, 95% CI = [0, 0.03]). Figure 5.4 presents a visual overview of the final model.

Associations between adversity and WM

The main results of the associations between the adversity measures and WM are summarized in Figure 5.5. None of the adversity measures were significantly associated with WM capacity after adjusting for multiple testing (all $ps \geq .063$). We also did not find evidence for practical equivalence for associations between any of the adversity measures and WM capacity (all $ps \geq .055$). Similarly, none of the adversity measures were significantly associated with WM updating after adjusting for multiple testing (all $ps \geq .370$). We also did

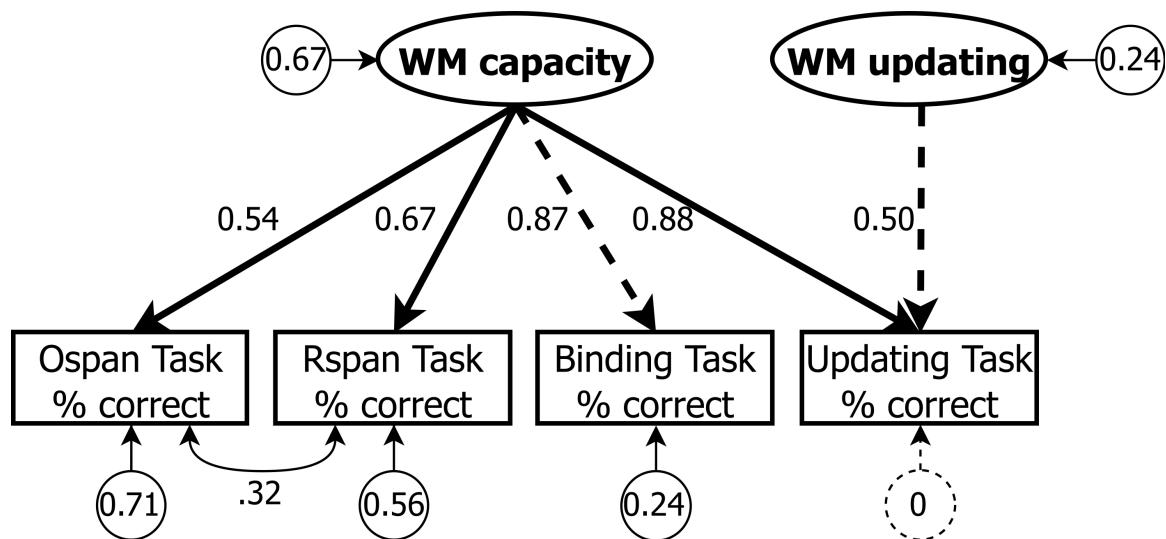


Figure 5.4. Overview of the final measurement model of WM performance. Ellipses represent latent variables, rectangles represent manifest variables, and circles represent unstandardized residual variances. Unidirectional lines represent standardized factor loadings and bidirectional lines represent covariances. All four manifest WM measures loaded on a latent WM capacity factor, reflecting the fact that people have to hold information active in WM on all tasks. We fixed the loading of WM capacity on the Binding Task to 1, reflecting the idea that the ability to create and maintain bindings is the main limiting factor in WM capacity (Gruszka & Nęcka, 2017; Oberauer, 2009; Wilhelm et al., 2013). WM updating was modeled as a latent factor capturing the residual variance in the updating task after accounting for variance related to WM capacity. WM = working memory; Ospan = Operation Span; Rspan = Rotation Span.

not find evidence for practical equivalence to zero for associations between any of the adversity measures and WM updating (all $p \geq .109$).

Posthoc non-preregistered analyses

We conducted three posthoc non-preregistered analyses, described in more detail in the supplemental materials. First, to contextualize our findings based on latent WM estimates, we estimated associations between adversity and performance on the separate WM tasks using four linear regressions. Threat had small, significant negative associations with performance on the Rotation Span Task ($\beta = -0.13, p = .002$), Operation Span Task ($\beta = -0.14, p = .002$), and Binding Task ($\beta = -0.12, p = .004$). None of the types of adversity were significantly associated with performance on the Updating Task (all $p > .181$), and only the association with unpredictability in the income-to-needs was practically equivalent to zero ($p = .041$).

Second, the inconclusive nature of our confirmatory results could indicate that the true effect sizes were smaller than the effect size of interest that we used for our power analysis ($\beta = 0.1$; i.e., that we lacked sufficient power). To explore this, we conducted an alternative test for the absence of an association between adversity and WM by constraining regression paths between adversity and WM factors to zero in the SEM. Constraining all paths to latent WM capacity to zero significantly reduced model fit, although the change

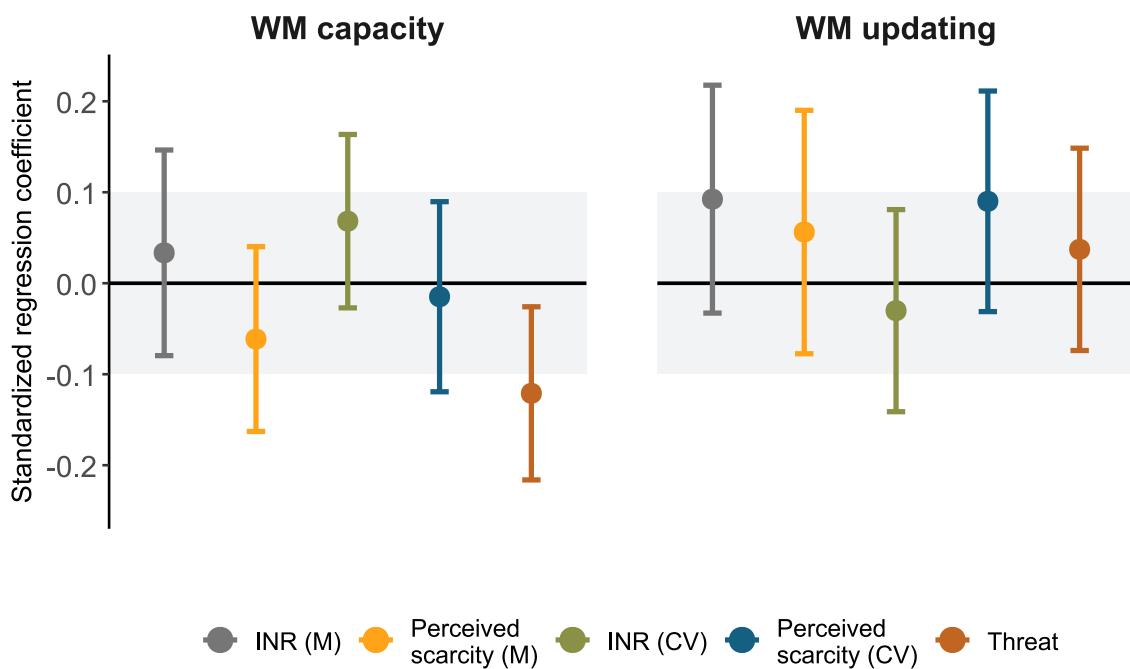


Figure 5.5. Results of the structural part of the SEM model testing the association between threat, deprivation, and unpredictability on latent estimates of WM capacity and WM updating. The gray area shows the area of practical equivalence. Solid points indicate effects outside the area of practical equivalence, which was true for all effects. Standard errors represent the 95% confidence intervals. CV = coefficient of variation; INR = income-to-needs ratio; M = mean; WM = working memory.

in AIC was below the cut-off as proposed by Burnham & Anderson (2002), Δ AIC = 7.62, $\Delta \chi^2(5) = 14.20$, $p = .014$, Robust CFI = 0.99, robust RMSEA = 0.03, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.04]. Constraining all paths to latent WM updating did not significantly reduce model fit, Δ AIC = 3.81, $\Delta \chi^2(5) = 5.85$, $p = .321$, Robust CFI = 0.99, robust RMSEA = 0.03, 95% CI = [0, 0.03]. Thus, these results were somewhat inconsistent with the preregistered frequentist equivalent tests.

Third, as a non-preregistered robustness check, we calculated Bayes factors for the preregistered equivalence tests using the *bain* package (Hoijtink et al., 2019), in which we evaluated whether the observed data are more likely under the hypothesis that the effects fall within the equivalence bounds, relative to the hypothesis that the effects fall outside of the equivalence bounds. The results are summarized in Table A4.3. For all but one association, the model comparisons showed at least strong evidence in favor of the data being more likely under the hypothesis that the effects fell within the equivalence bounds (BF_{10} ranging between 16.9 and 158.9). The only exception was the association between threat and WM capacity, for which we found moderate evidence in favor of the data being more likely under the hypothesis that the effect fell within the equivalence bounds ($BF_{10} = 5.5$).

Thus, these results were inconsistent with the preregistered frequentist equivalent tests, which did not find evidence for practical equivalence.

Deviation from the Stage 1 protocol

In the Stage 1 protocol, we planned to first access the dependent variables to construct the SEM, and then access the independent variables. Due to an unintended error, the first author already accessed the datasets containing the measures that would be used to compute the independent variables before finalizing the SEM. However, beyond reading them into the R environment, these data were not yet inspected, manipulated, or summarized. We contacted the PCI recommender upon finding out about this deviation, and agreed to describe this deviation as done here. For the sake of transparency, we timestamped the scripts for processing the independent variables at the moment of this unintended data access (https://github.com/StefanVermeent/liss_wm_profiles_2023/blob/d143e551018ba27313643a15bed57f329974272d/scripts/2_pipeline/1_ivs.R). They contain the code to read in the data, but no code yet for any type of data cleaning or variable computation.

5.4 Discussion

We investigated associations between adversity (threat, material deprivation, and unpredictability) and WM capacity, a person's ability to hold information available for later processing, as well as WM updating, a person's ability to mentally replace old with new information. We distinguished between WM capacity and updating on a latent level using four different tasks, three of which are primarily construed as WM capacity tasks, and one that is primarily construed as a WM updating task. The WM capacity factor loaded on performance of all four tasks, in line with previous findings (Frischkorn et al., 2022; Gruszka & Nęcka, 2017; Oberauer, 2009; Wilhelm et al., 2013). An additional WM updating factor accounted for the portion of variance in the Updating Task that was not explained by WM capacity. We did not find any consistent associations between adversity and WM capacity nor updating in our preregistered analyses. On the one hand, none of the associations significantly differed from zero. On the other hand, none of the associations fell within the pre-specified region of practical equivalence to zero (i.e., a between-person difference in performance that is practically equivalent to zero).

The confirmatory results were not consistent with hypotheses generated from a deficit framework. A large literature has documented negative associations between exposure to early-life adversity—especially deprivation—and WM capacity, which persists into adulthood (Farah et al., 2006; Goodman et al., 2019; Sheridan et al., 2022; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014; Young et al., 2018; but see Nweze et al., 2021). Similarly, studies with young adults have found that a higher frequency of recent as well as lifetime stressful major life events (i.e., negative events with a clear onset and offset, unlike chronic adversity) is also negatively associated with WM capacity (Klein & Boals, 2001; Shields et al., 2017, 2019). The results were also not consistent with hypotheses generated from adaptation frameworks. Recently, a small set of studies documented intact and even higher WM up-

dating performance in adolescents and adults who reported more exposure to childhood adversity (Young et al., 2018, 2022). These associations have been interpreted as reflecting developmental adaptations to adversity: in more threatening and unpredictable environments, it may be beneficial to be able to rapidly update the items held in WM (Ellis et al., 2017, 2022; Frankenhuys, Young, et al., 2020; Frankenhuys & Weerth, 2013). In contrast, we did not find consistent associations between adversity exposure and WM updating. These findings are inconclusive, as we also did not find evidence for practical equivalence in our preregistered analysis.

A set of non-preregistered robustness checks were comparatively more consistent with practically equivalent performance, although they did not fully rule out the existence of small associations between adversity exposure and working memory performance. First, A Bayesian reanalysis of the preregistered equivalence tests (using the same equivalence bounds) provided strong evidence in favor of the hypothesis that working memory performance was practically equivalent, in contrast to the preregistered analyses. Second, constraining the regression paths in the SEM to zero somewhat reduced model fit for WM capacity, but not for WM updating. This suggests that there may have been systematic associations with WM capacity that were smaller than the equivalence bounds used in the (Bayesian) equivalence tests. If true, the associations would be smaller than we expected based on the literature outlined above, and would require a larger sample size to reliably detect. These analyses were not part of the registered analysis protocol, and therefore should be interpreted with sufficient caution pending replication.

The Updating Task shared a large proportion of variance with the WM capacity measures, which aligns with prior psychometric work focused on the structure of WM (Lewandowsky & Farrell, 2010; Oberauer et al., 2000; Wilhelm et al., 2013). This highlights an important methodological issue for the field of adversity research, especially researchers working from adaptation frameworks, who hypothesize distinct effects of adversity on different components of WM (in contrast to deficit-oriented researchers, who expect adversity to have a negative effect on all components of WM). Specifically, adaptation-oriented researchers have hypothesized that certain types of adversity may enhance WM updating through developmental adaptation, while impairing WM capacity (Ellis et al., 2022; Young et al., 2018, 2022). So far, this hypothesis has—to our knowledge—only been tested based on raw performance on single WM updating tasks. However, if true, performance on single WM updating tasks may substantially underestimate positive associations between adversity and WM updating, as raw performance may be influenced by both deficit and adaptation processes (the former influencing WM capacity, inadvertently measured in WM updating tasks). Leveraging these psychometric insights will be pivotal to better understanding associations between adversity and WM for future studies.

Aside from psychometric considerations, a second potential reason for the discrepancy between our findings and those from previous studies is that our investigation fo-

cused on adverse experiences in adulthood. In contrast, most previous studies have focused on the effects of either childhood adversity or stressful life events. It is possible that, relative to childhood adversity, the association between adversity in adulthood and WM varies as a function of other factors. For example, the association between adversity in adulthood and WM might be stronger for people who also experienced adversity during childhood, either due to early developmental calibration to chronic stress and/or due to greater lifetime exposure to stress (Hostinar & Gunnar, 2013; Shields et al., 2017).

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This study had several strengths. First, the sample was drawn from the Dutch LISS panel, which provides a large, representative sample of the Dutch population. Second, we drew on the longitudinal nature of the LISS panel to estimate three key dimensions of adversity exposure (threat, deprivation, and unpredictability), using several indicators for each. Third, we included four WM tasks, and used SEM to separate variance related to WM capacity from variance related to WM updating. This allowed us to more precisely estimate capacity and updating as two key components of WM.

This study also had limitations. First, WM updating was measured as the residual variance of a single task after accounting for WM capacity. This means that the latent WM updating measure was not a pure measure of WM updating, but also included measurement error. This decision was mainly guided by the limited number of tasks that could be included due to time constraints. To obtain a more reliable measure of WM updating, it would be better to include several different WM updating tasks, just like we used several different WM capacity tasks. Second, as this was an online study, we had only limited control over the environment in which people completed the study. The models accounted for self-reported noise and distractions, and we excluded participants who interacted with other browser tabs during the WM tasks. Yet, there may have been other, unmeasured factors that could lower the reliability of our study relative to lab-based studies. Third, our results appeared to be underpowered, despite including 759 participants, which suggests that the associations between adversity and WM in adulthood are smaller than expected based on previous literature. Finally, our study did not include genetic measures. It is well-established that genetic variation accounts for a substantial portion of the individual differences in executive functions (Friedman et al., 2008). However, for genetics to have confounded our study, it would need to have caused both individual differences in cognition and in adversity exposures—producing non-causal associations between adversity and cognition. Testing this fuller picture would require using genetically informative designs.

Future research could build on the current study in four ways. First, modeling WM ability on a latent level using multiple tasks could be applied more broadly in the field of adversity research, as studies rarely directly account for the overlap in key cognitive processes across WM tasks. This is especially important for adaptation-based research focusing on WM updating ability, as WM capacity plays a substantial role in performance on updating tasks. Second, future work is needed to better understand the role

of developmental timing: is adversity experienced earlier or later in life associated differently with WM across the lifespan? Third, more research is needed to better understand the relationship between more objective (e.g., income-to-needs ratio) and subjective (e.g., perceived scarcity) indicators of adversity, as well as their respective association with cognitive functioning (Smith & Pollak, 2021). In our study, mean INR and mean perceived scarcity correlated moderately, suggesting that they capture similar but separable aspects of material deprivation, which could show different associations with cognition. Fourth, the field needs to account for functional heterogeneity within adversity-exposed populations (Masten, 2001). In a recent study, the majority of U.S. adolescents with low socioeconomic resources performed on par with their privileged peers (Shariq et al., 2024). The deficit pattern observed in the population as a whole was driven by a much smaller, cognitively less resilient, subgroup. A valuable direction is to combine such a ‘person-centered’ approach with structural equation modeling to estimate specific WM abilities among different subgroups within adversity-exposed populations.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, adversity research has been shifting towards a more balanced view, focusing not just on cognitive deficits but also on potential adaptations. This has spurred a growing number of studies investigating more precise links between specific types of adversity and different cognitive abilities. Adaptation perspectives in particular have emphasized the need to be more precise about how specific types of adversity are associated with specific cognitive abilities. However, this increased need for precision in the measurement of cognitive abilities requires more advanced psychometric approaches. For this, adversity researchers can draw, more than they currently do, on decades of psychometric research focused on WM and other cognitive abilities. Here, our psychometric investigation of WM yielded inconclusive associations with adverse experiences in adulthood. Building on this work will ultimately lead to a better understanding of the unique abilities that develop in contexts of adversity, as well as more precise intervention targets.

Footnotes

¹ It is also possible to have the decision boundaries correspond to distinct response options. For instance, if the task requires people to classify faces as expressing either an angry or happy emotion, the boundaries could correspond to the ‘angry’ and ‘happy’ response, respectively. This specification is useful if the research question pertains to decision preferences (e.g., do people tend to prefer option A over option B? Do people with more exposure to threat tend to interpret facial expressions as more negative?).

² There are two caveats to this statement. First, the standard DDM also contains the starting point of the evidence accumulation process and provides a measure of response bias. When the process starts closer to one boundary relative to the other, it reaches this boundary faster and more frequently (also increasing the false positive rate), while responses terminating at the other boundary are slower and less frequent. Modeling the starting point makes most sense if the decision boundaries correspond to distinct response options (e.g., angry versus happy face) rather than correct versus incorrect responses. In the latter case, the response bias parameter is usually fixed to be equidistant to each boundary. As this is the case throughout this dissertation, I do not consider the starting point here. Second, the DDM also allows for additional parameters that capture inter-trial variability in drift rate, boundary separation, and/or non-decision time. For instance, drift rates may decrease as people start to lose motivation. Simulation studies indicate that several hundreds of trials are necessary to obtain stable estimates of these variability parameters, many more than were used in the cognitive tasks included in this dissertation.

³ A fourth DDM parameter, the starting point, represents an initial bias towards one of the two decision options (e.g., a tendency to classify facial expressions as angry that extends to neutral faces). Note that allowing the starting point to vary only makes sense if response options differ in valence (e.g., happy and angry faces, which the current study does not include and thus is unable to examine).

⁴ The preregistration also included the Picture Vocabulary Task. However, after accessing the data we realized that this task was implemented using computerized adaptive testing (Luciana et al., 2018). This makes it unsuitable for DDM, as the model assumes the level of difficulty is the same across trials.

⁵ We ran parameter recovery studies simulating the data for the Inhibition Task, which has the lowest overall number of trials. Parameter recovery was excellent for the scenario that we planned in our main analyses (all $rs \geq .84$). See the supplemental materials for more details.

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Supplementary materials

Nederlandse samenvatting

Decennia aan onderzoek tonen aan dat mensen uit chronisch stressvolle omgevingen gemiddeld genomen slechter presteren op cognitieve taken. Dit is in verband gebracht met beperkingen in verschillende cognitieve vaardigheden. In recenter onderzoek is echter steeds meer aandacht voor adaptaties in specifieke vaardigheden en strategieën. Zulke adaptaties kunnen mogelijk leiden tot verbeteringen in vaardigheden die nuttig zijn voor het oplossen van unieke uitdagingen in stressvolle omstandigheden (bijvoorbeeld het herkennen van gevaar of het detecteren van zeldzame beloningen). Een betere integratie van deze bevindingen kan leiden is belangrijk voor de ontwikkeling van gebalanceerde wetenschappelijke en maatschappelijke inzichten.

Desondanks is het moeilijk gebleken om deficit- en adaptatioperspectieven met elkaar te integreren. In deze dissertatie beargumenteer ik dat één van de redenen hiervoor methodologisch van aard is. In beide typen onderzoek worden cognitieve vaardigheden vaak gemeten met behulp van ruwe prestaties op cognitieve taken. Voorbeelden van ruwe prestatiematen zijn gemiddelde reactietijden of het percentage correcte responsen. Zo worden langzamere responsen op inhibitietaken doorgaans geïnterpreteerd als een probleem in het negeren van afleidingen. Recent onderzoek in cognitieve psychologie laat echter zien dat het gebruik van ruwe prestatiematen meerdere limitaties behelst. Door deze limitaties overschatte onderzoekers mogelijk de mate waarin specifieke EF vaardigheden worden verslechterd door blootstelling aan stressvolle omstandigheden, en missen ze mogelijk adaptaties in vaardigheden en strategieën.

Dit proefschrift focust op twee limitaties van het gebruik van ruwe prestatiematen in de context van het meten van *executieve functies* (EF). EFs zijn een verzameling cognitieve vaardigheden die betrokken zijn bij plannen, redeneren, en doelgericht gedrag. De eerste limitatie is dat prestaties op EF taken niet alleen worden beïnvloed door specifieke EFs, maar ook door andere cognitieve processen. Voorbeelden van zulke cognitieve processen zijn de mate van voorzichtigheid waarmee iemand beslissingen neemt en de snelheid waarmee iemand een respons uitvoert. Dit betekent dat de ruwe prestaties van twee mensen kunnen verschillen zelfs als ze niet verschillen in hun EF vaardigheid, bijvoorbeeld wanneer de één relatief voorzichtiger is dan de ander. De tweede limitatie is dat prestaties op EF taken niet alleen worden beïnvloed door specifieke EF vaardigheden, maar ook door algemene processen die van invloed zijn op verschillende EF taken. Als een dergelijk algemeen cognitief proces leidt tot lagere prestaties op meerdere taken kan dit verkeerd worden geïnterpreteerd als meerdere verslechterde vaardigheden. Beide limitaties staan een integratie van deficit- en adaptatiemodellen in de weg (**Hoofdstuk 1**).

Om de eerste limitatie te addresseren maak ik in dit proefschrift gebruik van cognitief modelleren, specifiek het *Drift Diffusion Model* (DDM). Het DDM geeft een verklaring van de manier waarop mensen beslissingen nemen op taken met binaire keuzeopties, zoals

veel EF taken. Het verklaart verschillen in reactiesnelheden en accuratesse als een combinatie van (1) de snelheid waarmee iemand informatie verzamelt, (2) de hoeveelheid informatie die iemand nodig heeft om een beslissing te nemen (met andere woorden, hoe voorzichtig iemand is) en (3) de snelheid van processen die niet direct betrokken zijn bij nemen van beslissingen, zoals het encoderen van informatie aan het begin van de taak en het uitvoeren van een actie zodra een beslissing is genomen. Door het DDM toe te passen op empirische data van reactiesnelheden en accuratesse is het mogelijk om individuele schattingen te krijgen van deze drie cognitieve processen. Om de tweede limitatie te adresseren gebruik ik *structural equation modeling*. Deze techniek maakt het mogelijk om te onderzoeken in hoeverre prestaties op EF taken worden beïnvloed door cognitieve processen die worden gedeeld door taken, versus cognitieve processen die uniek zijn voor specifieke taken.

Het onderzoek beschreven in dit proefschrift laat zien dat de samenhang tussen stressvolle omstandigheden en specifieke EF vaardigheden wordt overschat door het gebruik van ruwe prestatiematen. Dit blijkt in de eerste plaats uit het feit dat negatieve associaties tussen blootstelling aan stressvolle omstandigheden en *drift rates* worden gedreven door algemene processen die van invloed zijn op verschillende EF taken. Amerikaanse Kinderen met meer blootstelling aan dreiging (maar niet deprivatie) hadden een lagere algemene *drift rate* op drie EF taken en een basale verwerkingsnelheidstaak (**Hoofdstuk 2**). Nederlandse volwassenen met meer blootstelling aan dreiging in de volwassenheid, en zowel dreiging als deprivatie in de kindertijd, hadden eveneens een lagere algemene *drift rate* (**Hoofdstuk 3**). Tot slot presteren jongvolwassenen met meer blootstelling aan dreiging en onvoorspelbaarheid in de kindertijd slechter op de Flankertaak vanwege lagere perceptuele verwerking, niet vanwege een lagere inhibitievaardigheid (**Hoofdstuk 4**). In **Hoofdstuk 6** bespreek ik verschillende mogelijke interpretaties van dit algemene proces. De meest waarschijnlijke verklaring—op basis van de huidige bevindingen en voorgaand onderzoek—is dat het een indicatie is van een lagere algemene verwerkingsnelheid. Het is echter mogelijk dat de algemene *drift rate* factor een combinatie is van verschillende processen, zoals iemands huidige staat (motivatie, vermoeidheid, etc.) en meer stabiele individuele eigenschappen.

Nadat ik corrigeer voor algemene processen is er weinig tot geen bewijs dat blootstelling aan stressvolle omstandigheden samenhangt met specifieke EF vaardigheden. Amerikaanse kinderen met meer blootstelling aan dreiging hebben taakspecifieke *drift rates* die praktisch equivalent zijn aan die van kinderen uit een veiligere omgeving (**Hoofdstuk 2**). Dit suggereert dat hun EF vaardigheden even goed ontwikkeld zijn. Deze studie bevatte echter maar één taak per EF ability; hierdoor was het niet mogelijk om te onderzoeken in hoeverre taakspecifieke *drift rates* een reflectie waren van specifieke EF vaardigheden. In een vervolgstudie met Nederlandse volwassenen includeerde ik meerdere taken per EF vaardigheid (inhibitie en aandachtsverschuiving), wat het mogelijk maakt om de EF vaardigheden op latent niveau te schatten. Na een correctie voor al-

gemene processen is de overgebleven variantie echter niet toe te schrijven aan specifieke EF vaardigheden. Hoewel sommige vormen van stressvolle omstandigheden (met name dreiging in de kindertijd) negatief samenhangen met *drift rates*, zijn al deze effecten onafhankelijk van elkaar, ook voor taken die dezelfde vaardigheid beogen te meten. Met andere woorden, mensen met meer blootstelling aan stressvolle omstandigheden verwerken informatie op specifieke taken langzamer vanwege unieke aspecten van de taak, niet vanwege verslechterde EF vaardigheden die worden gedeeld door sommige taken. Tot slot hangt blootstelling aan stressvolle omstandigheden ook niet samen met de vaardigheid om informatie in het werkgeheugen te updaten, nadat ik corrigeer voor de capaciteit van het werkgeheugen (**Hoofdstuk 5**).

Tot slot laat mijn onderzoek zien dat mensen uit meer stressvolle omstandigheden in sommige gevallen andere strategieën gebruiken dan mensen uit minder stressvolle omstandigheden. Amerikaanse kinderen met meer blootstelling aan dreiging hebben een (al dan niet bewuste) strategie om langer de tijd te nemen en daarmee hun accuratesse te vergroten (**Hoofdstuk 2**). Ik vond echter geen bewijs voor een dergelijke strategie bij jongvolwassenen (**Hoofdstuk 4**) en volwassenen (**Hoofdstuk 3**). Daarnaast suggereert mijn onderzoek ook dat jongvolwassenen met meer blootstelling aan dreiging en onvoorspelbaarheid in de kindertijd langzamer zijn in het verwerken van informatie op de Flanker-taak omdat ze een meer holistische informatieverwerkingsstijl hebben (**Hoofdstuk 4**). Dit betekent dat ze meer geneigd zijn om te focussen op globale eigenschappen van visuele informatie in plaats van individuele stimuli. Mogelijk is dit een adaptatie die mensen beter in staat stelt om perifere informatie snel te detecteren.

Dit proefschrift biedt een aantal aanbevelingen voor toekomstig wetenschappelijk onderzoek (**Hoofdstuk 6**). Het is belangrijk om rekening te houden met het feit dat (1) prestaties op EF taken worden beïnvloed door meerdere cognitieve processen en (2) dat prestaties op EF taken voor een substantieel deel worden beïnvloed door algemene processen die van invloed zijn op meerdere taken, niet door specifieke EF vaardigheden. Daarnaast zouden studies idealiter twee of meer taken per EF vaardigheid includeren, zodat deze vaardigheden op latent niveau geschat kunnen worden. Deze methodologische benadering, rustend op cognitief modelleren en *structural equation modeling*, kan een centrale rol spelen in twee huidige onwikkelingen in het veld. Ten eerste stelt het toekomstig onderzoek beter in staat om precieze hypothesen te testen over de interactie van deficit- en adaptatieprocessen binnen dezelfde persoon. Ten tweede kan het helpen in het beter begrijpen waarom mensen uit stressvolle omstandigheden gevoeliger lijken te zijn voor verschillende typen inhoud van cognitieve taken, en welke cognitieve processen hiervoor verantwoordelijk zijn. Op deze manier is cognitief modelleren een onmisbare techniek voor de volgende generatie onderzoekers in dit veld.

