ADVERSITY AND RELATIVE PERFORMANCE

**Within-person cognitive performance across abilities among adversity-exposed people in the SECCYD**

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**Abstract**

The idea that some skills might be enhanced by adversity is gaining traction. For example, research leveraging the hidden talents approach has uncovered a few narrow, context-dependent skills enhanced by adversity. Yet, for a field to grow, we must not dig too deep, too fast. In this paper, we zoom out and evaluate two basic features of the hidden talents approach. First, adversity simultaneously decreases and increases test performance, depending on the skill. Although commonly assumed, this assertion is rarely tested. Second, empirical work suggests enhanced skills manifest within- not between- individuals. Although studies have compared the same skill in different testing contexts, research comparing different skills have tested, at most, two or three skills. One reason is that the hidden talents approach uses a functional-link approach to understanding which skills fit the challenges of adverse environments. We expand on this finding, by analyzing ten skills in the Woodcock Johnson Cognitive and Achievement test battery in a large, prospective longitudinal dataset. We use a within-person modeling strategy to examine how exposure to harshness and unpredictability relate to *relative* decreases and increases in subtest performance compared to a person’s overall performance. Our goal is to sketch adversity-shaped cognitive profiles, identify possible drivers of lowered overall performance, and map out sets of ‘intact’ skills.

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Developmental science commonly asserts that adversity-exposure in development lowers cognitive performance, an assumption built on decades of research (Duncan et al., 2017; Farah et al., 2006; Fraley et al., 2013; Hackman et al., 2010, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2019; Raby et al., 2015). In recent years, adaptation-based frameworks, rooted in the idea that adversity might enhance certain abilities, compliment this work—and it is gaining traction (Ellis et al., 2020; Frankenhuis, Young, et al., 2020; Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013; Frankenhuis & Nettle, 2020). At its inception, the goal of adaptation-based frameworks was to inspire a more well-rounded view of adversity and its influence on abilities—one that incorporated both the struggles and strengths of people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013). As it develops, the core task of adaptation-based research is to “uncover a high-resolution map of specific cognitive abilities that are enhanced as a result of growing up under high-adversity conditions” (Ellis et al., 2017, p. 562).

To illustrate this map, research has used confirmatory study designs. Researchers identify a specific challenge posed by a dimension of adversity and the abilities needed to meet those challenges. An intuitive bridge is built between an ability and an environmental challenge and a confirmatory study idea is born. This approach has uncovered a handful of interesting adversity-enhanced abilities. For example, past work has reasoned that constantly changing environments might shape the ability to track and respond to changes and studies have shown that, indeed, unpredictable environments appear to enhance attention-shifting (Fields et al., 2021; Mittal et al., 2015) and working memory updating (Young et al., 2018, 2022).

Adaptive hypotheses have also focused on testing content. Here, the idea is the performance improves when testing content matches the lived experience of people exposed to adversity. For example, Frankenhuis and colleagues (2020) hypothesized that exposure to violence might enhance reasoning about social dominance hierarchies—but not for neutral content, such as age. Their design revealed that youth exposed to more violence were equally, or more, accurate when memorizing social dominance relationships than youth exposed to less violence. Using a similar experimental design, Young and colleagues (2022) examined how real world compared to abstract testing stimuli affects performance on an attention shifting and working memory test. They found that adversity-exposed youth scored higher on working memory updating tasks with real world compared to abstract content.

The confirmatory approach and focus on adaptive links between environments and abilities has many appealing features, such as hypothesis generation. It forces researchers to be specific and logically tie together challenges posed by an environment and abilities that help people meet them. This helps direct new research and reduces the variable space to more focused sets, such as cognitive tests that might measure an important ability helpful in adverse environments. Yet exclusive focus on confirmatory hypotheses comes with pitfalls. If employed too often, it can create tunnel vision. Emerging research programs that rely on confirmatory designs exclusively—without complementary approaches—can miss new insights and progress might stagnate.

Our aim is to complement adaptation-based, confirmatory research with principled exploration (Flournoy et al., 2020; Rozin, 2001). We return to our map of cognitive skills shaped by adversity. We zoom out, take stock, and survey the landscape. What territory needs exploration and which areas need re-mapping? Rather than using confirmatory hypotheses to guide our design, we step back and examine the essential features of an adaptation-based framework. First, an ability might be enhanced when it helps meet environmental challenge but lowered when it does not, suggesting that adaptation and impairment happen at the same time and within the same person. Although commonly assumed, this assertion is rarely tested. Furthermore, empirical work suggests enhanced abilities manifest within- not between- individuals. Although studies have compared the same ability in different contexts, research comparing different skills have tested, at most, two or three abilities. We need within-person designs examining performance across many more abilities.

Finally, research often focuses on comparing lowered and enhanced test performance, but some abilities might remain ‘intact’, or unaffected by adversity exposure (Frankenhuis, Young, et al., 2020). We know little about the intact skills of people exposed to adversity. We also know little about the drivers of lowered performance on broad and generic measures of ability. Traditional approaches collapse many abilities into composites and find adversity exposure lowers performance. But a smaller set of skills could drive this effect. Both intact skills and drivers of lowered performance add much-needed nuance to our map.

We argue that adaptation-based frameworks provide useful guideposts, but we should use shovels, not scalpels to break new ground. In this paper, we focus on developing basic criteria for identifying enhanced, intact, and performance drivers. We apply these criteria to examine how exposure to harshness and unpredictability shape cognitive profiles across ten skills. We look at these skills within-person to examine *relative* decreases and increases in test performance compared to a person’s overall test performance. Our goal is to excavate new ground, re-map old territory, and feed theory development. In doing so, we position ourselves to identify possible drivers of lowered overall performance, map out sets of ‘intact’ skills, and discover relative enhancements. We also hope to encourage adaptation-based research to conduct more principled exploration to more systematically draw our map of cognitive skills of people exposed to adversity.

**Method**

**Participants**

Families were initially recruited for the NICHD SECCYD in 1991. A total of 1364 families met all the prescreening criteria, namely that mothers: (a) were age 18 or older, (b) did not plan to move, (c) had a newborn without any known disabilities (and could leave the hospital within one week), (d) had no history of substance abuse, (e) could speak English, and (f) lived within 1 hour driving distance from the research lab and were in a relatively safe neighborhood. More information about recruitment and selection procedures is available from the study (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; see https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/series/00233). The current analyses included participants with non-missing data on most predictors and outcome variables through age 15 (N = 1156).

**Measures**

***Predictors***

**Unpredictability.**

**Harshness.**

***Outcomes***

**Picture vocabulary.**

* verbal comprehension/crystallized knowledge
* 5 assessments, 54 months, grades 1, 3, 5, and at 15 years

**Verbal analogies.**

* verbal fluid reasoning and crystallized knowledge
* 2 assessments, grade 3 and at 15 years

**Passage comprehension.**

* vocab and comprehension skill
* 3 assessments, grades 3, 5, and at 15 years

**Applied problems.**

* practical math problem solving skill
* 5 assessments, 54 months, grades 1, 3, 5, and at 15 years

**Memory for Sentences.**

* short term retrieval
* 3 assessments, 54 months and grades 1 and 3

**Incomplete words.**

* auditory processing
* 2 assessments, 54 months and grade 1

**Memory for names.**

* long term retrieval
* 2 assessments, grades 1 and 3

**Letter-word identification.**

* verbal knowledge
* 4 assessments, 54 months, grades 1, 3, 5

**Word attack.**

* auditory processing
* 2 assessments, grades 1 and 3

**Calculations.**

* math calculations
* 2 assessments, grades 3 and 5

**Results**

**Data Analysis Strategy**

**Primary Analyses**

**Secondary Analyses**

**Discussion**

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