

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND COGNITIVE VULNERABILITIES IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

by RYAN HONG

Every parent wishes the best for his or her child – to become successful adults leading fulfilling lives. How do we, either as parents or as society-at-large, ensure the psychological well-being of our children? Can we identify children at risk and do something before psychological problems develop? In this issue, Dr Ryan Hong, a CFPR Research Associate and Assistant Professor of the NUS Department of Psychology, explores the developmental origins of cognitive vulnerabilities with the aim of identifying potentially vulnerable children and improving their psychological health.



In most societies, children are often thought of as a precious source of human capital worthy of substantial social investment. By investing in children, not just in their formal education but also in their psychological resilience and social-emotional skills, we hope that our children will bring our society forward to greater heights. On a personal level, every parent wishes the best for his or her child – to become successful adults leading fulfilling lives. How do we, either as parents or as society-at-large, ensure the psychological well-being of our children? Can we identify children at risk and do something about it before psychological problems develop?

There are different approaches and levels of analysis in the study of children's psychological

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adjustment. Our research team has focussed primarily on cognitive theories surrounding childhood psychological problems. A central tenet in these theories is that the cognitive or belief system a child possesses influences the encoding, interpretation, and processing of information regarding the self and world at large. Certain thinking patterns or beliefs, which we refer to as cognitive vulnerabilities, are thought to be potentially maladaptive and self-defeating, increasing the child's risk to develop subsequent emotional or behavioural problems.



In our research, we choose to examine cognitive vulnerabilities in middle childhood, roughly between the ages of 7 to 12, for a few reasons.

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First, the middle childhood years represent a developmentally important transition into the formal school system (i.e., enrolment into Primary 1 at age 7). The way children adapt to and cope with the rigours of formal schooling is of great importance to parents, educators, and policy-makers, given the pervasive normative pressures of achieving academic excellence in the local context. Second, previous research suggests that cognitive vulnerabilities emerge around the ages of 7 to 9 years. Hence, it is critical to examine the emergence and subsequent development of these vulnerabilities over time. Third, very little research regarding cognitive vulnerabilities has been conducted in this age group. Therefore, we hope to address some important gaps in the literature. For example, we do not know what the developmental origins of cognitive vulnerabilities are (i.e., what factors might give rise to cognitive vulnerabilities).

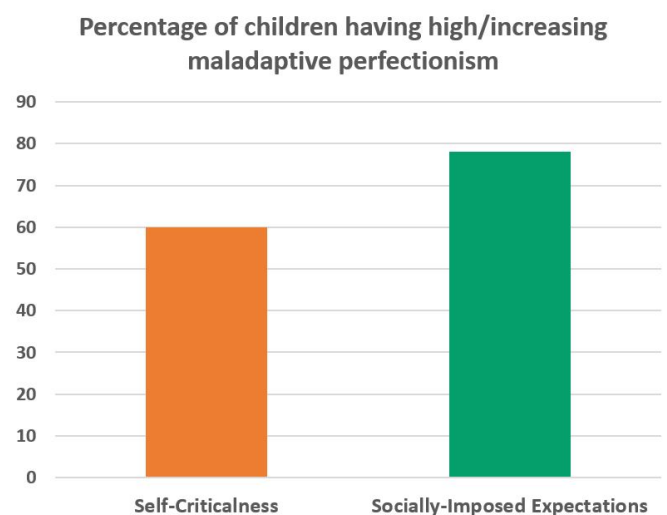
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Our research team designed one of the first longitudinal studies to track local children over a 5-year period. We managed to recruit about 300 children (at age 7) and their families and we followed up with them when the children were 8, 9, and 11 years old. Using both child and parent reports, along with behavioral task assessment methods, we measured a wide variety of variables, including cognitive vulnerabilities and their hypothesized developmental origins (e.g., child temperament

characteristics, parent-child interaction dynamics, and environmental stress encountered by the child and his/her family). Latent class/growth analyses were done to examine the development, consequences, and origins of the cognitive vulnerabilities. We present findings from two studies that we have published from this data set. The first study focuses on maladaptive perfectionistic beliefs whereas the second study examines a collection of related cognitive vulnerabilities.

Maladaptive Perfectionism

While pursuing academic excellence is a cherished goal for many school-going children and their parents, a potential pitfall comes in the form of dysfunctional beliefs about how perfect one should be. In particular, if a child



becomes overly concerned of his mistakes and whether his performance is on par with the high standards imposed by others (such as parents and teachers), the child may have developed a set of maladaptive perfectionistic beliefs that is detrimental to his well-being.

We found that a majority of children felt that others, such as parents and teachers, have high

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expectations for them to be perfect in every aspect of their lives, especially in academics. Furthermore, children with intrusive and controlling parents had a higher tendency to be overly critical of themselves and this tendency increased over the years. Controlling parents often deprive children the opportunities to learn (even from making mistakes) in a nonthreatening environment. When parents intrude, it signals to children that they are not good enough, and hence their parents have to intervene in various domains of their lives. As a consequence, these children may become overly concerned about committing even the slightest errors. Over time, these children develop maladaptive perfectionistic beliefs and show elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Core Cognitive Vulnerability

Several cognitive vulnerabilities to depressive and anxiety symptoms have been proposed in the research literature, including a negative cognitive style, ruminative style, and an intolerance of uncertainty. Taking the example of the negative cognitive style, a child with this style tends to infer the occurrence of negative

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events (e.g., being teased by peers) as being due to internal factors (e.g., I am not likeable) that are stable (i.e., this characteristic of mine is something that will be with me for a while) and global (i.e., this characteristic will affect my relationships with many other people).

Amongst these supposedly distinct forms of vulnerabilities, one common underlying theme is the negative repetitive thinking style that is pervaded with a sense of uncontrollability. From our research, we found evidence to indicate the existence of a core vulnerability factor influencing these various distinct vulnerabilities. More importantly, once formed at around 8 years of age, the core vulnerability remained relatively stable throughout the middle childhood years until about age 11.

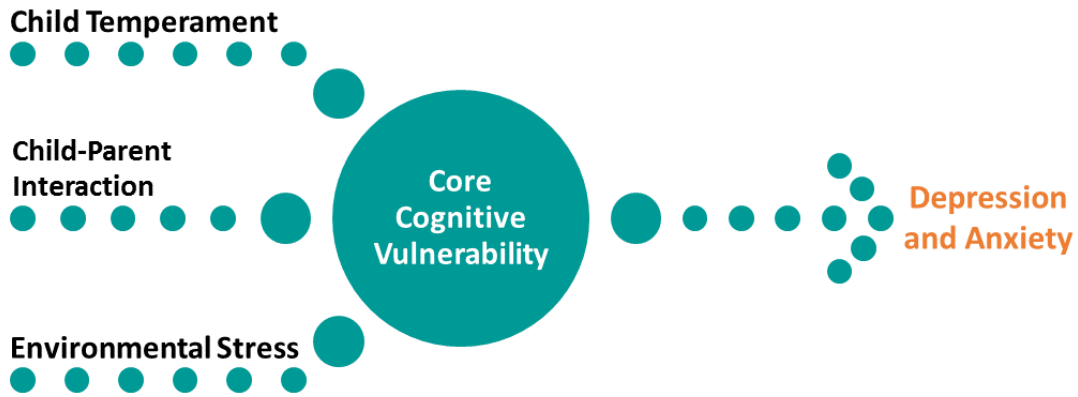
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Nonetheless, there are substantive individual differences in these developmental pathways (e.g., Child A may exhibit relatively high core vulnerability at age 8 and remain at that level throughout the 4 years, whereas Child B may exhibit low core vulnerability at age 8 but display an increase over time). These core vulnerability trajectories are strongly correlated with trajectories of internalizing symptoms of depression and anxiety. Furthermore, we found that child negative affectivity (i.e., a predisposition to experience negative emotions), low familial socioeconomic status, and the experience of life stressors predicted the emergence of this core vulnerability.

Implications

Collectively, these studies support the idea that dysfunctional cognitions can lead to

Conceptual Framework of Core Cognitive Vulnerability



psychological maladjustment in the form of emotional distress. More importantly, we are able to identify the developmental origins of these cognitive styles and beliefs. Constitutional predispositions of the child (e.g., negative affectivity), the quality of parent-child interaction, and the external environment in which the child is embedded (e.g., amount of life stressors, socioeconomic condition of the family) appear to play important roles in the emergence of maladaptive cognitions.

By knowing the developmental origins of cognitive vulnerabilities, this allows for early identification of potentially vulnerable children. For instance, inhibited and emotionally volatile children, especially those from families with low socioeconomic status, could be at risk of developing maladaptive thinking patterns. Once identified, these at-risk children and their families could thereby be the targets of intervention. Children could be counselled with regards to potentially damaging cognitive patterns, and be helped to substitute them with

more adaptive ones. Parents could be supported by learning about the best parenting practices. Financial or in-kind support might alleviate some of the challenges and difficulties low-income families face in their everyday lives. Through our research, the hope is that at-risk children (and their families) are given a helping hand so as to build up psychological capacity and resilience to take on future challenges.

SELECTED RESEARCH:

Hong, R. Y., Lee, S. S. M., Chng, R. Y., Zhou, Y., Tsai, F. F., & Tan, S. H. (2016). Developmental trajectories of maladaptive perfectionism in middle childhood. *Journal of Personality*. Advance online publication.

Hong, R. Y., Lee, S. S. M., Tsai, F. F., & Tan, S. H. (2017). Developmental trajectories and origins of a core cognitive vulnerability to internalizing symptoms in middle childhood. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 5, 299-315.