



## Cumulative risks and promotive factors for Chinese adolescent problem behaviors



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### ABSTRACT

The current study draws on resilience theory and examines the cumulative effects of multiple level risk and promotive factors on internalizing (e.g. psychological distress and self-acceptance) and externalizing outcomes (e.g. delinquency and substance use) among Chinese adolescents. The conceptual model includes factors across individual, peer, family, and community domains.

A cross-sectional survey using self-reported questionnaires was conducted in two urban cities in China: Beijing and Xian ( $N = 1356$ ; 52% female; Grades 7 to 12). Structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses were conducted to test the conceptual models.

More cumulative risks were associated directly with more psychological distress, substance use and delinquency. The cumulative promotive factors provided compensatory effects of resiliency through decreased levels of psychological distress and problem behavior. Adolescents with more promotive factors reported higher self-acceptance. The study also provides evidence of developmental differences between middle-school and high-school adolescents in the compensatory model of resilience.

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Problem behaviors among Chinese youth are an emerging social and public health issue in China (Cheng, 1999, 2008; Deng & Roosa, 2007; Wang, 2006). With the marked increases in delinquent-type behaviors (Greenberger, Chen, Beam, Whang, & Dong, 1999; Wong, 2001) and cigarette smoking (Anderson Johnson et al., 2006; Hesketh, Lu, Jun, & Mei, 2007) among Chinese adolescents, increased emphasis is placed on examining potential susceptibility, promotive factors and their mechanisms affecting adolescents' psychological well-being and problem behaviors.

China is in the midst of rapid modernization and change in social relations (Wong & Mok, 1995). Chinese youth have begun to absorb eagerly knowledge and values of Western culture while keeping their own cultural consciousness (Xiong, 2009). Moreover, researchers identified many similarities in promotive and risk factors of problematic behaviors between Chinese and U.S. adolescents (Jessor et al., 2003).

Chinese adolescents have also begun to share more similar coping strategies that are typically more salient in Western society (Liu, Tein, & Zhao, 2004; Shek, 1999, 2006c), making models of problem behavior and resiliency developed within the Western cultural context increasingly relevant to Chinese adolescence (Arthur, Hawkins, Pollard, Catalano, & Baglioni, 2002). Based on the Western-developed theories and a resilience perspective, we investigated an array of problem behaviors by examining the cumulative effects of multiple-domain risk and promotive factors among Chinese adolescents.

### Theoretical background

Both Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and the Social Development Model (SDM) (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996) support the rationale of including multiple-level factors in understanding problem behavior during childhood and adolescence. Bronfenbrenner (1986) suggested a socioecological framework to examine how contextual factors (e.g. family, school, peers, community, society, and culture) may shape adolescent behaviors. The framework included both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects and the neighborhood characteristics that can interact together to influence the development of problem behaviors. The SDM takes into account risk factors as well as promotive factors to predict the development of prosocial or antisocial behaviors among

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adolescents (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). The SDM hypothesizes that children's attitude, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped by the social unit, such as family, peers, or neighborhoods, to which they are firmly bonded. In other words, the more bonds with antisocial units that a child has, the more likely the child will engage in problem behavior. On the other hand, pro-social bonds may help the child to have more prosocial attitudes and behaviors (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). Researchers who emphasize the social ecological perspective and the use of comprehensive theoretical models, therefore, generally examine adolescent problem behaviors by considering multiple factors in individual, family, peer, school, and neighborhood levels.

#### *Resiliency among adolescents*

In addition, researchers have drawn growing attention on positive influences or promotive factors in youth development. Similar to their Western counterparts, not all Chinese children exposed to risk develop internalizing or externalizing problems in the presence of adversity (Lee, Shek, & Kwong, 2007). In a review of research literature on resiliency framework, Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) summarized the definition of promotive factors as the individual assets or contextual resources that help youth avoid the negative effects of risks.

Resiliency theory identifies two processes on how promotive factors play a role in helping youth to overcome the negative risk effects and positively improve the health and well-being (Fergusson, Vitaro, Wanner, & Brendgen, 2007; Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987). The first process is explained in a compensatory model where promotive factors directly reduce the negative outcomes, such as psychological distress and problem behaviors, to compensate for the effect of risk exposure (Garmezy et al., 1984). The second process is described in a risk-protective model where promotive factors interact with risk factors and buffer or moderate the negative influence of risk exposure (Rutter, 1985). Researchers have provided empirical evidence that supports both the compensatory and risk-protective models for understanding how risk and promotive factors are associated with substance use and delinquent behaviors (Newcomb & Felix-Ortiz, 1992; Ostaszewski & Zimmerman, 2006; Simons-Morton, Hartos, & Haynie, 2004; Stoddard et al., 2013; Van der Laan, Veenstra, Bogaerts, Verhulst, & Ormel, 2010; Wills, Vaccaro, & McNamara, 1992).

Application of ecological models on resilience research suggests that multiple domains of influence for both risk and promotive factors are necessary. Ostaszewski and Zimmerman (2006) identified risk and promotive factors that can be categorized into four ecological domains: 1) individual characteristics (e.g. self-acceptance, coping styles and skills, social skills, academic performance, violence victimization, hopelessness); 2) peer influences (e.g. peer health-related behaviors, friends' support, friends' positive influence); 3) family relationships (e.g. parent-child relationship, parental support, parental monitoring, family conflicts); and 4) community characteristics (e.g. drug, alcohol, or cigarette availability in the community, availability of after-school activities, community violence) (Ostaszewski & Zimmerman, 2006).

#### *Multiple-level risks and promotive factors among Chinese adolescence*

Few researchers have started to emphasize the importance of including multiple-level risks and promotive factors in the effort of preventing problem behaviors among Chinese adolescents (Jessor et al., 2003; Shek, 2007; Wen et al., 2007). In a review article of substance abuse in Hong Kong, Shek (2007) noted that the social ecological understanding and the resilience perspective are keys for understanding Chinese adolescent problem behaviors. Shek also discussed several factors that predispose the adolescent substance abuse problem. Individual-level factors such as curiosity, lack of coping skills, underachievement and non-engagement at school are associated with adolescent substance use (Shek, 2006a; Shek & Lee, 2004). Family-level factors

such as the family structure (e.g. non-intact families, generally defined as families with both parents, as opposed to intact families where one or both parents are not present), parental absence or parental marital problems, and parenting problems may play a role in influencing children's development of substance use (Ma, Yao, & Zhao, 2013; Mak et al., 2010; Shek, 2006b,c, 2007). Shek also noted that peer influence is a strong factor contributing to Chinese adolescent problem behaviors. In fact, he noted that the effects of peer influence may interact with the larger social environment. The emerging subculture and virtual communication among adolescents, for example, may make children more vulnerable to negative interpersonal influences (Shek, 2007). Yet, most of the studies reviewed by Shek are conducted in Hong Kong, not in mainland China. Although these risks and protective factors are mainly focusing on adolescents in Hong Kong, some similar factors have been examined in several studies in China. Wen et al. (2007) studied modifiable family and school environmental factors associated to teen smoking in China. The study indicated that smoking behaviors and attitudes of peers, parents, and supervising teachers as well as the school surroundings influence the individual smoking behaviors in different statuses (e.g. experimental smoking, regular smoking, or attempting to quit) (Wen et al., 2007).

Furthermore, researchers noted that the emphasized family value and small family size (one family, one child) may be crucial and unique in their influences on adolescent problem behaviors in China, including smoking. Due to the single child policy, the Chinese children who do not have siblings may have norms and behaviors shaped largely by peers and other interpersonal relationships (Wen et al., 2007). Although several specific contextual factors of problem behaviors among Chinese adolescents have been discussed by researchers, the empirical research literature that addresses multiple risks and promotive factors or the cumulative effects of these factors in the Chinese contexts is limited. In addition, few of the researchers used resiliency theory to guide the analysis and interpretation of their results.

#### *The present study: Testing cumulative effects of risks and promotive factors among Chinese adolescents*

Most researchers studying adolescent resiliency have focused on single risk factors or promotive factors, for example, negative peer influence or parental-child attachment, rather than considering the cumulative effects of multiple factors (Ostaszewski & Zimmerman, 2006). Most researchers that have examined multiple factors of problem behaviors, however, focused on only one or two contextual levels (Wen et al., 2007). Yet, in the face of a particular constellation of risks within specific social contexts, a single aspect of promotive factors may not be sufficient to help youth overcome the effects of multiple risks (Rutter, 1987).

A primary goal of the present study was to conduct a more integrative analysis that tests the cumulative, cross-domain effects of risks and promotive factors among Chinese adolescents. The design of this study expands on previous research in the following aspects. First, our study considers Chinese adolescents' development across the individual, immediate environment (family, school, and peers), and larger social environment (community, society, cultural). Studies on youth problem behaviors that adopt social-ecological perspectives indicated that individuals exposed to an accumulation of risks in multiple domains, rather than a single domain, are more likely to develop negative outcomes later (Loeber, Slot, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2008; Stoddard et al., 2013). Conversely, an accumulation of promotive effects lowers the probability of negative outcomes or weakens the effects of risk exposure (Ostaszewski & Zimmerman, 2006; Stoddard et al., 2013; Van der Laan et al., 2010; Youngblade et al., 2007). Our study examines the relationship between the cumulative risk factors, the cumulative promotive factors and the problem behaviors.

Second, most of the studies related to adolescent resiliency were conducted in Western cultures and few researchers have examined resiliency theory among Chinese adolescents (Arpawong et al., 2010; Lam,

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