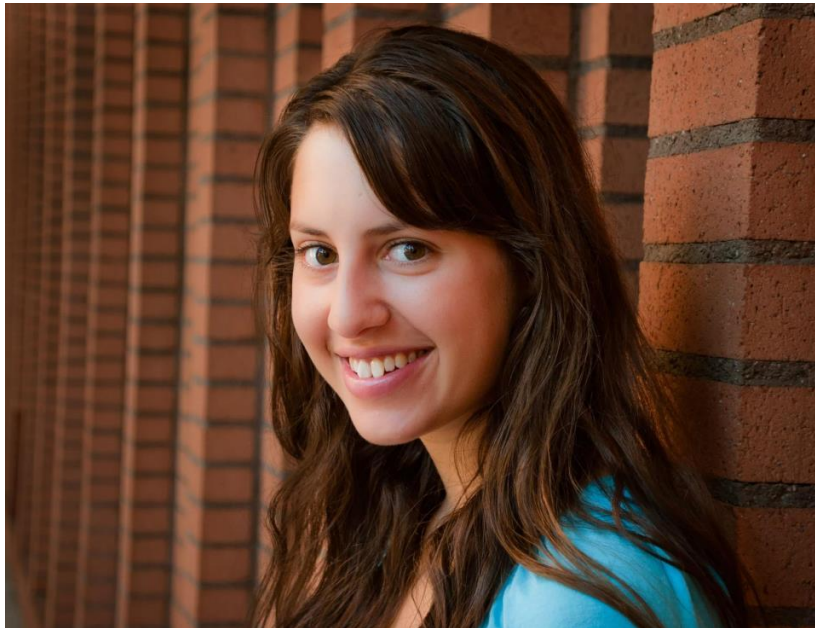


Negative Social Interactions among Adolescents: Bullying and Its Impacts on Academic Achievement

By: Francesca Corley



Background

It is easy to like Leah Singerman when you first meet her. It's only after you have spent some time with her, however, that you realize that lurking behind her wide grin and bubbly personality is a Trojan all-star. Leah is in her junior year at USC with a major in Psychology and a minor in Cinematic Arts. She has been a dedicated member of the Trojan Marching Band for the past three years and is a USC Helene, two of her most valued college experiences to date. Aside from her on-campus library job, she is a Dornsife Ambassador for prospective and admitted USC students and even finds time to give SAT tutoring to inner-city high school kids in the local community. With all this going on, it is amazing she has any time left to work on her research. Yet, this involvement is what makes her shine; Leah is an all-around "people person" who loves helping and working with others in her day-to-day activities. In fact, it is this love of helping others paired with her experience tutoring kids that provided motivation for her research.

Leah is an undergraduate research assistant in Dr. David Schwartz's lab where she studies adolescent development. By administering an extensive psychology survey to high school students, Leah and the Schwartz Lab are able to look for trends in the way kids mature and how social interactions between peers affect development. When asked about how she became interested in this research she comments, "It actually chose me" when a grad student came into her adolescent psychology class and mentioned an opening in Dr. Schwartz's lab. Wanting hands-on experience and thinking she would go into a career in teaching, she found the position to be a perfect fit.

Materials and Methods

Dr. David Schwartz is both a USC psychology professor who teaches abnormal and adolescent psychology as well as a well-known expert on bullying and adolescent peer interactions. Leah works with his lab to administer a comprehensive survey to a high school in Orange County twice a year. The data from this survey can then be broken down with complicated statistical analyses which have been included in several research papers (Fig. 1). Leah's responsibilities in this process included putting the surveys together, coding them, and going to the schools to administer them to the students. She gave each student a large packet which was completed over the course of their scheduled class, usually lasting a couple hours. Leah enjoyed interacting with the students by helping them fill out the survey, answering questions, and obtaining the resulting data. She even answered any questions these young students may have had about college and their futures.

The layout of the survey is relatively straightforward, but to say it is extensive would be an understatement. The first nineteen pages alone are lists of students in each grade level, and the following pages include copies of these lists with varying instructions. Students are asked to choose names next to instructions like, "bubble in people who are popular, unpopular... etc." Other instructions ask them to choose from these lists the students who they believe bully others or are bullied themselves as well as who they like and who they do not like. The survey then takes a variety of measures for each individual such as parents' occupations, ethnic identity, time spent on homework, eating and drinking habits, mood disorders, and many, many more. With all these questions, the researchers are able to extract a great deal of information from just one survey.

Summary of bivariate correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. T1 overt victim	–	.76***	.88***	.67***	.80***	.62***	.38***	.35***	.13	.15*	.19**	.14	.25***	.25***
2. T2 overt victim	.54***	–	.76***	.88***	.71***	.71***	.39***	.48***	.17*	.16*	.22**	.07	.19**	.19**
3. T1 relational victim	.60***	.47***	–	.73***	.82***	.66***	.46***	.40***	.14	.19**	.20**	.18*	.25***	.27***
4. T2 relational victim	.51***	.58***	.78***	–	.67***	.74***	.35***	.54***	.17*	.19**	.22**	.11	.20**	.28***
5. T1 unpopularity	.56***	.50***	.45***	.46***	–	.78***	.32***	.33***	.21**	.17*	.25***	.17*	.25***	.26***
6. T2 unpopularity	.42***	.53***	.44***	.60***	.66***	–	.22***	.35***	.19**	.19**	.25***	.15*	.26***	.24***
7. T1 social rejection	.51***	.42***	.78***	.70***	.33***	.33***	–	.67***	.00	.00	.02	.11	.00	.00
8. T2 social rejection	.35***	.42***	.65***	.76***	.28***	.46***	.69***	–	.06	.00	.04	.06	.08	.11
9. T1 math	.04	.09	.00	.00	.20	.17*	–.06	.04	–	.53***	.62***	.43***	.47***	.28***
10. T2 math	–.04	–.07	–.04	.05	.14*	.10	–.11	–.04	.56***	–	.37***	.58***	.31***	.38***
11. T1 language arts	–.03	.00	.01	.00	.17*	.14*	–.07	.00	.57***	.55***	–	.46***	.56***	.42***
12. T2 language arts	–.07	–.06	–.01	–.04	.12	.11	–.07	–.02	.49***	.68***	.55***	–	.35***	.37***
13. T1 academic engage	–.05	.05	.03	.05	.18**	.07	–.01	.05	.37***	.27***	.41***	.34***	–	.68***
14. T2 academic engage	–.12	–.08	–.02	–.04	.09	.06	–.10	.03	.37***	.41***	.41***	.46***	.56***	–

Figure 1. Statistical analysis that shows correlations between factors of bullying and academic performance

It is designed to account for a vast array of factors that contribute to the developmental process. These can range from ethnicity and socioeconomic status to gender roles and popularity. Because they cover such a broad scope of aspects of development, Leah and the Schwartz lab are able to run many different statistical tests and draw multiple conclusions from the data. Their results bear valuable insight into the emotional and mental development of inner-city kids like the ones Leah works with on a daily basis.

Applications of the Data

In one of these papers published in January of this year, Schwartz draws on his data to observe the correlation between students' social status and academic performance. A "cross-panel model" was used to observe these specific relationships (Fig. 2). The title, "Do Academically-Engaged Adolescents Experience Social Sanctions from the Peer Group?" questions this relationship in a specific context. His lab selected from a subject pool of 9th and 10th grade high school students specifically with a high percentage being of Hispanic ethnicity in a community suffering from "economic distress." The conclusions of this research suggest that students who are the most engaged and perform the best academically are also bullied and mistreated the most for these very reasons. These findings contradict previous literature which suggests that those who are bullied the most perform poorly as a result of an inability to cope with the social stress. The Schwartz lab continues to present other research papers such as "Social Status, Perceived Social Reputations, and Perceived Dyadic Relationships in Early Adolescence" published in 2012 using the same data from this survey to draw additional conclusions.

Leah has even had her own projects: one analyzes the correlation between popularity and depression and another explores ethnic identity and academic achievement. The latter has provided Leah with results she is still interpreting. She hypothesizes that students who identify with different ethnic identities will have different levels of academic achievement correlating to pressures from their specific ethnic groups. She proposes that students who identify as Hispanic will correlate with lower academic achievement while those who identify as Asian will show an opposite effect. She looks forward to analyzing her results and coming to a definitive conclusion in the near future. It is exactly studies like Leah's that constantly serve to observe long-standing relationships from new perspectives.

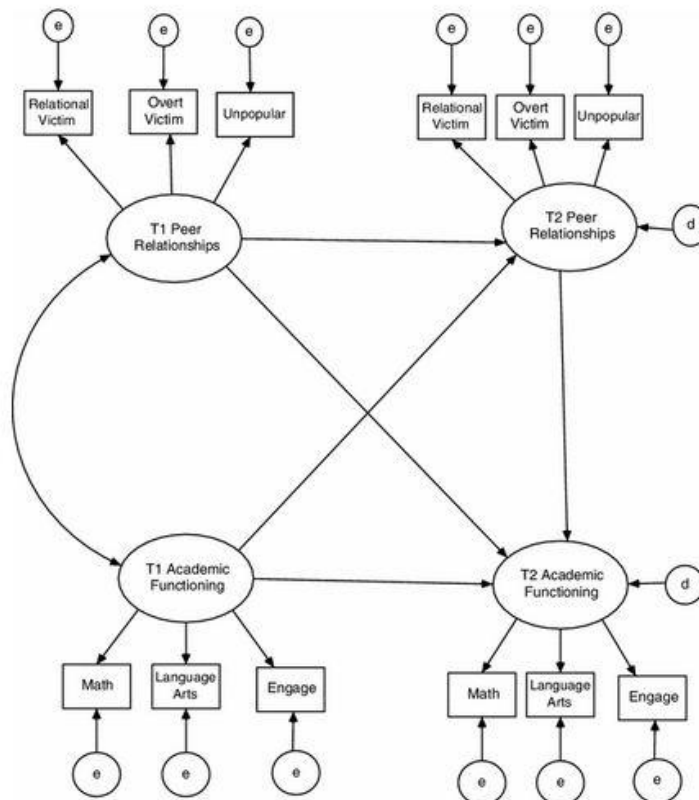


Figure 2. Cross-panel model examining longitudinal associations between peer relationships and academic functioning

Significance

So why do we care? Leah responds passionately that there are “so many reasons!” that this research is significant. Bullying and harassment in schools are prevalent everywhere and can be extremely damaging to developing adolescents. The presence of these negative social interactions in an environment where adolescents should feel safe and supported is not only counterproductive but is also a detriment to their psychological development during the crucial, formative years of their lives.

Schwartz’s findings from January allow us to take a step back and really consider the different environments and contexts surrounding these issues. His conclusions are significant because they force us to reexamine prior findings and take into consideration the “influence of sociocultural context, school academic climate, and developmental change.”

This is precisely why Leah enjoys working on these studies with Dr. Schwartz who is a leading expert on this issue. She feels that this research is incredibly important for educators and researchers alike whose duty it is to figure out why bullying occurs and how to stop it. In fact, this could possibly be one of the reasons she might get involved in Teach for America someday, putting her passion for teaching and researching skills to good use. Leah doesn’t want to make a career choice just yet, however; she says that she has a lot of ideas on the table at the moment. For now, she’s keeping an open mind, “In terms of the future, I really, honestly don’t know. It’s wide open.”