BULLYING, DEPRESSION AND THEORY OF MIND: Chloe Hudson

By Atif Kukaswadia

Bullying is a common problem among Canadian youth. Forty-seven percent of Canadian parents report that their child is a victim of bullying, and one in three adolescent students in Canada report being recently bullied. Bullying can take different forms, such as physical bullying (kicking and punching another student), relational bullying (excluding someone from social activities or spreading rumours), and cyberbullying (making fun of someone using the internet). Bullying impacts victims in different ways, and has been associated with anxiety, depression and increased suicidal ideation. However, there is significant variation in how children respond to bullying. Why is it that some children are less affected when they are bullied, while others are deeply affected? How can we explain this?

Currently a second-year student in the MSc Clinical Psychology program in the Department of Psychology, Chloe Hudson is fascinated by these questions, and hopes to answer them using “Theory of Mind.” Theory of Mind, or ToM, is a branch of cognitive science that describes the ability to understand the beliefs and intentions of others, and how these may be different to your own. Using this theory, Hudson intends to explore the relationship between bullying and depressive symptomology, and whether ToM can explain why some victims are more deeply affected by victimization. She hypothesizes that adolescents having strong ToM abilities, i.e., being more in tune with how others feel, may result in increased depressive symptoms when victimized.

To answer these questions, participants aged 12-18 years complete a series of tests which include computer-based tasks, interviews with the researchers, paper-based questionnaires, and standardized tests aimed at measuring intelligence and executive functioning. The computer-based tasks are aimed at measuring two components of ToM: decoding and reasoning. The decoding tasks measure how well the respondent can identify another person’s emotional and mental state. For example, one task has the participant look at a picture of someone’s eyes and then select the emotion displayed from a series of four words. The reasoning tasks evaluate the ability to explain or predict others’ actions based on an integration of knowledge about a person and the contextual environment. This is measured by first presenting the participant with a short story in which one of the characters unintentionally says something that is offensive to another. The participant must identify what the person said, and why it might be offensive. With 77 of a target number of 80 participants enrolled in her study, Hudson is excited to finish her master’s degree this summer, and start on a PhD degree
Graduate school was a homecoming for Hudson. Originally from Kingston, Hudson left the Limestone City to pursue undergraduate training at the University of Guelph. While there, she realized that she enjoyed research and designing her own research questions. She started working as a research assistant with Dr. Kate Harkness in the Mood Research Lab, while also volunteering with Dr. Elizabeth Kelley in the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Lab. She chose Queen’s for her graduate training because of the blend of research training, clinical opportunities, and the strong coursework component offered by the Department of Psychology.

She continues to work with Dr. Kelley. After completing her master’s, Hudson hopes to continue studying depression. Depression is surrounded by stigma and misinformation, and the opportunity to help unpack the causes and consequences of this disease is something she looks forward to. Hudson is also actively involved with Research Matters – a collaborative project among Ontario’s 21 publicly-assisted universities to bring research knowledge to the broader public. As the Queen’s University student representative to this campaign, she is participating in numerous public outreach events, including a Virtual Scavenger Hunt that leads people to read online about cutting-edge research happening in the province.

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