

Study analyzes personality traits of bullies, victims

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Michelle Harris, a UA Honors College student studying psychology, said she is drawn to studying people's personalities. "That is my primary research interest. It's a huge area that can help us to understand a lot of outcomes and why people do what they do." (Photo credit: David Scott Allen)

(PhysOrg.com) -- Individuals with a high level of self-compassion were less likely to have been a bully or a victim, finds new research by University of Arizona undergraduate Michelle Harris.

Michelle Harris, a University of Arizona senior studying [psychology](#), has completed an investigation that sought to determine whether college students were bullies or victims in middle or high school, and whether

they now maintain personality traits in line with their prior experience of [harassment](#).

Among her most telling findings, Harris said that while bullies are assumed and victims might be assumed to have higher levels of extraversion, neither did.

"I did not expect the extraversion finding," said Harris, a UA Honors College student slated to graduate in May. "It should have been statistically significant at least in bullies, but I found no significance whatsoever."

Last year, Harris earned a \$1,500 Undergraduate Research Grant for her study, "Personalities of Bullies and Victims," which, unlike most other studies on harassment, focuses on a traditional college-age population instead of students in elementary and middle school.

Harris is among three dozen students who will present her research during the Feb. 9 Honors College Research Expo for undergraduates.

The 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. event will be held in the South Ballroom of the Student Union Memorial Center, 1303 E. University Blvd., and is free and open to the public.

Harris developed her project, which serves as her thesis, through a collaboration with her faculty adviser, Stephen T. Russell, the Fitch Nesbitt Endowed Chair, and Elisabeth Morgan Thompson, who directs the Gender, Sexuality, and Conformity in Schools project at the UA. Harris also worked with Matthias Mehl, a UA psychology professor.

Her study, and the work of other UA researchers investigating bully and victim behavior, is especially timely given the suicides among teenagers.

Recent cases making national and international news were the deaths of Tyler Clementi, who was a Rutgers University student when he committed suicide, and also Justin Aaberg and Asher Brown, both who killed themselves after having been harassed.

In particular, Harris said she was drawn to working with Russell, who also directs the UA Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families, because of his expansive research on youth sexuality and health.

"My main interest is personality development, and I wanted to add to the research he does as well as receive input from him in that area," she said.

"I was drawn to work with Dr. Russell in the very beginning because, at the time, I was interested in studying adolescent development, which is what he was doing, just in the context of sexuality."

For her project, Harris honed in on a number of personality characteristics: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness and self-compassion.

She used a questionnaire involving a series of items to classify the 250 students, who were aged 18 and 19, in her study as either having been a bully or a victim. The current study was part of a larger investigation of nearly 370 students, which included some who did not fit the bully-victim dichotomy.

Yet Harris noted that she did not capture whether students had a particular "life event," or whether they had received some form of therapy or intervention. She also affirms that her study cannot and was not meant to determine what types of personality traits are more likely to lead to a person being a bully or victim.

Still, she said some of her findings remain relevant for a number of reasons.

Her investigation did confirm a number of findings related to other studies in bullies and victims. Of note, victims of harassment were more likely to express depressive and anxious symptoms. Also, attachment styles – such as being anxiously attached or avoidant – turned out to be significant associations.

But Harris noted a number of other noteworthy findings.

The link between conscientiousness, such as rule-following, and victimization can be explained by self-compassion. Prior scholars of harassment have known of the relationship between [personality traits](#) and victimization experiences, but most have only hypothesized about reasons for it.

This gets to another one of Harris's major findings.

Self-compassion is defined as having a high level of self-kindness, mindfulness and both a lesser emphasis on judgment and a feeling that one is part of a "common humanity," Harris said.

This is key, particularly for those who would like to counter bullying behaviors or help victims to avoid internalizing their abuse as something they either deserve or brought upon themselves.

"You cannot really change a person's personality with intervention," Harris said.

"So, for example, we cannot change how agreeable someone is as a person, but we can focus on improving levels of self-compassion, which is related to a few of the major traits," she added. "The important thing

is that self-compassion is modifiable."

Provided by University of Arizona

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