

Project 5: Adolescent risk and resilience after shared adversity: Developing an experimental classroom paradigm to probe socioemotional mechanisms.

Proposed Supervisory Team

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Background/Rationale

Exposure to adverse and traumatic events is common during adolescence and is one of the strongest risk factors for mental health difficulties. Such experiences are often witnessed, discussed, or shared collectively through schools, communities, and social media. A hallmark response after traumatic stress is the development of intrusive imagery, a key driver of psychological distress. Research has identified modifiable processes influencing risk and resilience following adversity but has largely focused on adults and individuals in isolation.

For adolescents, many emotionally challenging events are experienced, witnessed and/or discussed among peers. Community violence, school-based incidents (e.g., the death of a peer), and distressing material shared through social media can affect entire peer groups. Yet schools, families, and practitioners have little guidance on how to manage peer processes to promote resilience after such shared adversities.

Adolescents' heightened sensitivity to social influence means interpersonal processes, such as co-rumination, may disproportionately affect emotional adaptation. Despite this, most experimental models of adversity neglect the social context in which adaptation naturally unfolds. This limits our understanding of causal social mechanisms that confer risk and resilience.

Proposed Research aims

This DPhil will address this challenge by developing the first experimental paradigm for studying exposure to shared adversity in adolescents and subsequent intrusive imagery and emotional adaptation. Leveraging OCEMR's Experimental Classroom, the project could create controlled yet ecologically valid shared experiences, enabling rigorous experimental investigation of previously inaccessible peer processes. This innovation would address a longstanding methodological barrier that has prevented the field from understanding how adolescents adapt to adversity together rather than alone.

The findings could provide the first experimental evidence on how peers shape adolescents' responses to shared adversity, informing future group or school-based interventions. This project would suit someone interested in psychological trauma, adolescent social development, and innovative research methods.

Potential Methodologies

Test the feasibility and validity of a novel experimental classroom paradigm.

- Identify socioemotional processes, for example, through:
 - Naturalistic follow-ups examining peer interactions and intrusive imagery
 - Examine peer mechanisms through social network analyses.
- Manipulate causal mechanisms (e.g., peer interactions).