Title: Social Motivation as a Predictor for Loneliness in Young Adults with ASD and Other Social Challenges

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Introduction: Prior research shows that young adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) report less social motivation and greater levels of loneliness than their typically developing peers (Laugeson 2015). However, social motivation as a predictor for loneliness in the young adult population has yet to be extensively examined. Given the strong relationship between loneliness and self-reported feelings of anxiety and depression, understanding poor social motivation and its relationship to loneliness may assist practitioners in providing more targeted interventions to decrease psychological distress (Mazurek 2014). The impact of social motivation in the young adult population is also particularly important as these individuals may be less likely to seek treatment, and thus, may be more likely to go unnoticed and untreated. The purpose of this study was to examine whether self-reported social motivation is a predictor for loneliness in young adults with ASD and other social challenges. It was hypothesized that lower social motivation would be a predictor of social isolation and loneliness.

Methods: Participants included 82 young adults, (73.2% male; mean age=22.46, SD=4.02) presenting for treatment through the UCLA Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®), an evidence-based, caregiver-assisted social skills program for young adults with ASD and other social challenges. Social Motivation was measured using self-reports on the Social Responsiveness Scale-Second Edition (SRS-2; Constantino 2012) Social Motivation subscale. Loneliness was measured using self-reports on the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA; DiTommaso 1993) Social Isolation subscale. All assessments were conducted at baseline prior to treatment.

Results: A linear regression was calculated to predict social isolation and loneliness on the SELSA in relation to social motivation on the SRS-2. A significant regression was found ($F(1,80)=5.20, p<.05$), with an $R^2$ of .061, revealing that poorer social motivation was related to greater social isolation and loneliness.

Discussion: These results support the original hypothesis that poorer self-reported social motivation may predict greater social isolation and loneliness in young adults with ASD and other social challenges. This study suggests that young adults who are less motivated to seek out social interactions with peers, may actually be experiencing greater feelings of isolation and loneliness, which in turn might result in higher rates of anxiety and depression. Thus, while on the surface, some young adults may appear to lack motivation to engage others socially, they may simultaneously be experiencing internal psychological distress related to loneliness and social isolation. Given the strong relationship between loneliness and depression/anxiety, targeted interventions to improve social functioning among even those who appear socially disinterested may be warranted.

References/Citations: