Title: Young Adult Self-Reported Social and Romantic Isolation at Baseline as a Predictor of Success in the UCLA PEERS® Social Skills Intervention

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Introduction: Deficits in social skills, including impaired social-emotional reciprocity, are common hallmarks for those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Otero et al. 2015). These social deficits are often accompanied by deficits associated with other psychological symptoms and comorbidities that frequently occur in individuals with ASD, such as social and romantic isolation and social anxiety (Sze & Wood, 2007). Previous research on the UCLA Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®), an evidence-based social skills intervention for adolescents and young adults with ASD targeting friendships and romantic relationships, demonstrates improvements in social skills outcomes (Laugeson et al. 2012; Laugeson et al. 2015). While research suggests that social skills improve following participation in the PEERS® intervention, the extent to which levels of social and romantic isolation at baseline predict treatment outcomes requires examination. The present study examines social and romantic isolation as predictors of treatment success following the PEERS® for Young Adults intervention.

Method: 54 young adults with ASD, ranging from 18-35 years of age (M=22; SD=3.897), and their caregivers attended 90-minute group treatment sessions over 16-weeks to learn guidelines related to the development and maintenance of social and romantic relationships. To assess baseline social and romantic isolation, young adults completed the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale, (SELSA; DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993) prior to treatment. Treatment outcomes were assessed by examining young-adult-reported change in social anxiety symptoms using the Social Anxiety Scale (SAS; La Greca, 1999) and the Quality of Socialization Questionnaire (QSQ; Laugeson 2017). Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationship between baseline social and romantic isolation on the SELSA and treatment outcome on the SAS and QSQ following intervention.

Results: Pearson correlations revealed a significant relationship between the Social Isolation subscale of the SELSA at baseline and the number of romantic dates as measured by the QSQ (p<.05), suggesting lower self-reported social isolation prior to treatment predicted greater improvement in the number of romantic dates following treatment. Additionally, the Social Isolation subscale of the SELSA was significantly correlated with Total Scores on the SAS (p<.01), suggesting decreased social anxiety, while lower scores on the Romantic Isolation subscale of the SELSA prior to treatment also predicted lower Total Scores on the SAS following PEERS® (p<.01).

Discussion: These findings suggest that young adults with ASD who report less social isolation at baseline show greater increases in the amount of invited and hosted romantic dates following the PEERS® intervention. These results also suggest that young adults who report lower levels of social and romantic isolation at baseline may experience lower levels of social anxiety following the PEERS® intervention. These findings demonstrate that young adults’ social and romantic isolation prior to receiving treatment may be an important predictor of treatment outcomes following the PEERS® social skills intervention.

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