

Paranoia and mistrust in adolescents-Lessons learned from research

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Aims of Talk

- Understand what is meant by mistrust and paranoia
- Understand what paranoia in teenagers looks like
- Understand how paranoia affects teenagers
- Discuss recent research on the role of social adversity
- Upcoming project
- Questions?



What is paranoia?

- Exaggerated belief that others want to harm you deliberately
- Can be psychological, physical, financial or social
- A spectrum: Ranges from everyday mistrust (e.g., fears of rejection) to more severe feelings of threat (fear of significant harm) which are less common

Paranoia in Teenagers

Paranoia tends to peak in adolescence and often lessens into adulthood, though it persists for a minority

Weekly paranoid thoughts in 20-30% of UK school going teens (Bird et al., 2022)

UK teens with clinical disorders experienced double the level of paranoia present in the general population (Bird et al., 2018; Bird et al., 2022; Linscott & van Os, 2013)

Overall, prevalence research limited

How does paranoia negatively affect teenagers



Reduced **social functioning**
(i.e., connecting and building relationships with others)



Reduced **role functioning**
(i.e., fulfilling school and work responsibilities)
(Fan et al. 2022).



Poorer **self esteem** and **well-being**
(i.e., optimism, autonomy, competency; Bird et al. 2021; Kingston et al. 2022)



For a minority may be a risk factor for development of **mental health disorders e.g., depression, psychosis, anxiety**

The Role of Social Adversity in Adolescent Paranoia

Recent findings



Social Adversities and Paranoia in Chinese Adolescents

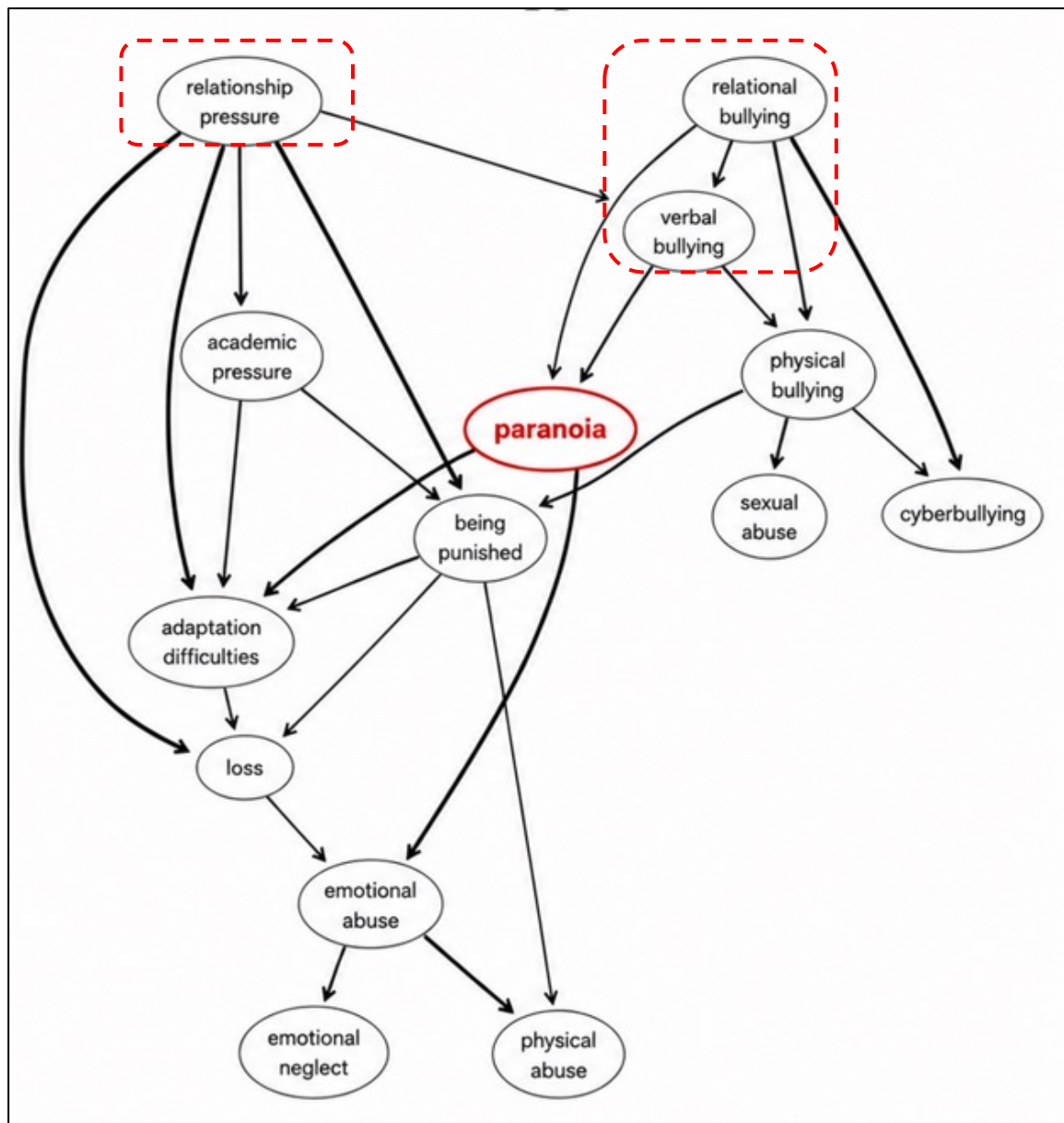
Tang et al. (2026)

- Analysed the links between paranoia and various adverse social experiences in adolescents over time
- Two time points
- Measures of: cyberbullying, verbal bullying, relational bullying, sexual abuse, physical abuse, academic stress, loss...
- Students aged 13–18

Time 1: N=1643 teens

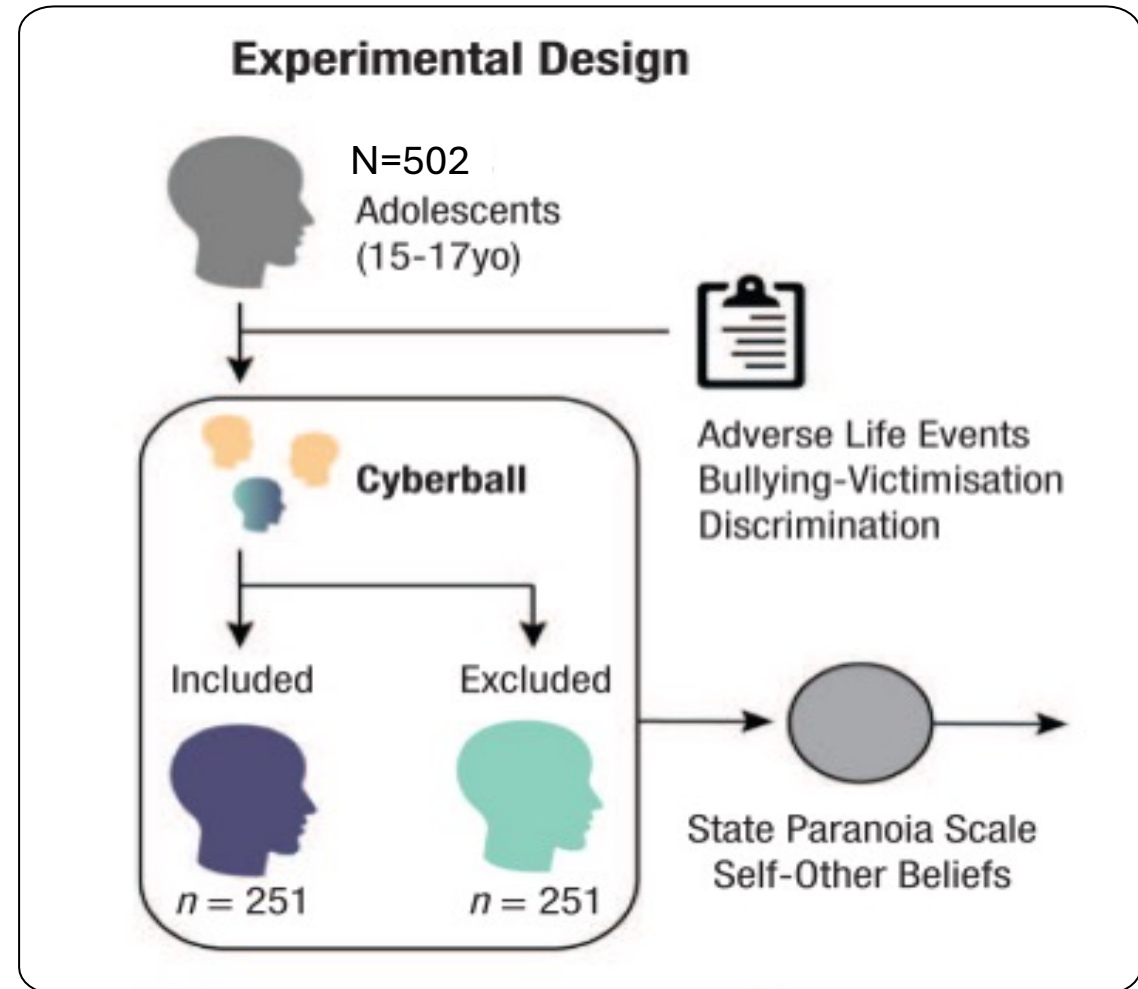


Time 2: N= 1077 teens: 6 months Later



Social Threat, Negative Beliefs, and Altered Social Learning Underpin Paranoia in Adolescents: An Experimental Study

Kingston et al. 2026



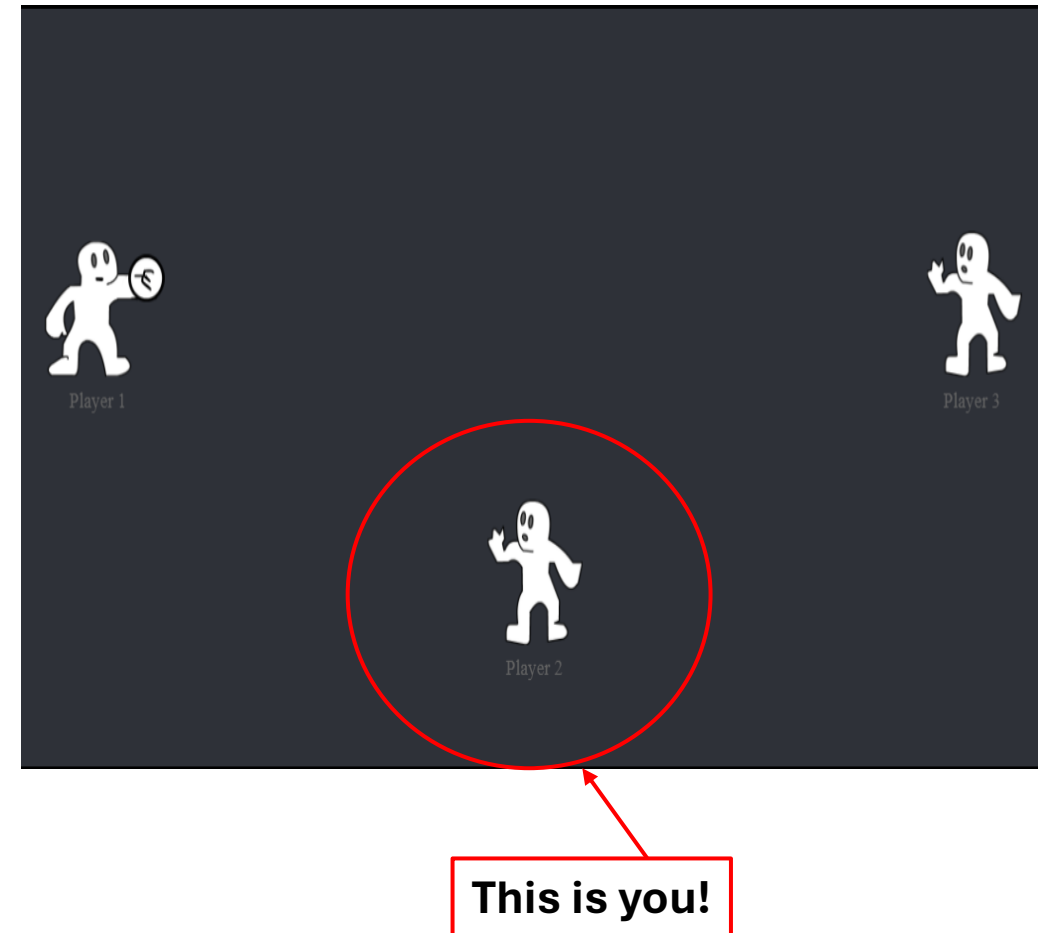
Also played a decision-making game to assess social learning-paranoia link**

Cyberball

- Online ball passing game: Participants informed that the other players are real, but computer generated.

Two versions

- **Exclusion:** receive the ball once/twice and then excluded for the remainder of the game-reliably induces paranoia.
- **Inclusion:** receive the ball regularly: feel included



Findings

- Adverse life experiences (illness, financial difficulties, parental separation, death...) intensified paranoia **only under conditions of exclusion**
- Bullying or discrimination experiences: intensified paranoia both when excluded and when included in Cyberball: increased susceptibility to paranoia even when others acting inclusively.
- Adversities involving **harm from others** more influential than “non interpersonal” harm e.g., illness

Managing Adolescent Paranoia

Intervention Components



Mental Imagery and Adolescent Paranoia

Mental imagery: seeing through the mind's eye, hearing through the mind's ear, Smelling through the mind's nose... Flashbacks and flashforwards into the future



Imagery Types

May promote feelings of Paranoia

Insecure Imagery

imagining a person that makes you feel uneasy or wary



Critical Imagery

Imagining a critical figure in your life



Shown to reduce paranoia

Secure imagery:

involves participants imagining e.g., a safe, caring relationship



Compassionate imagery

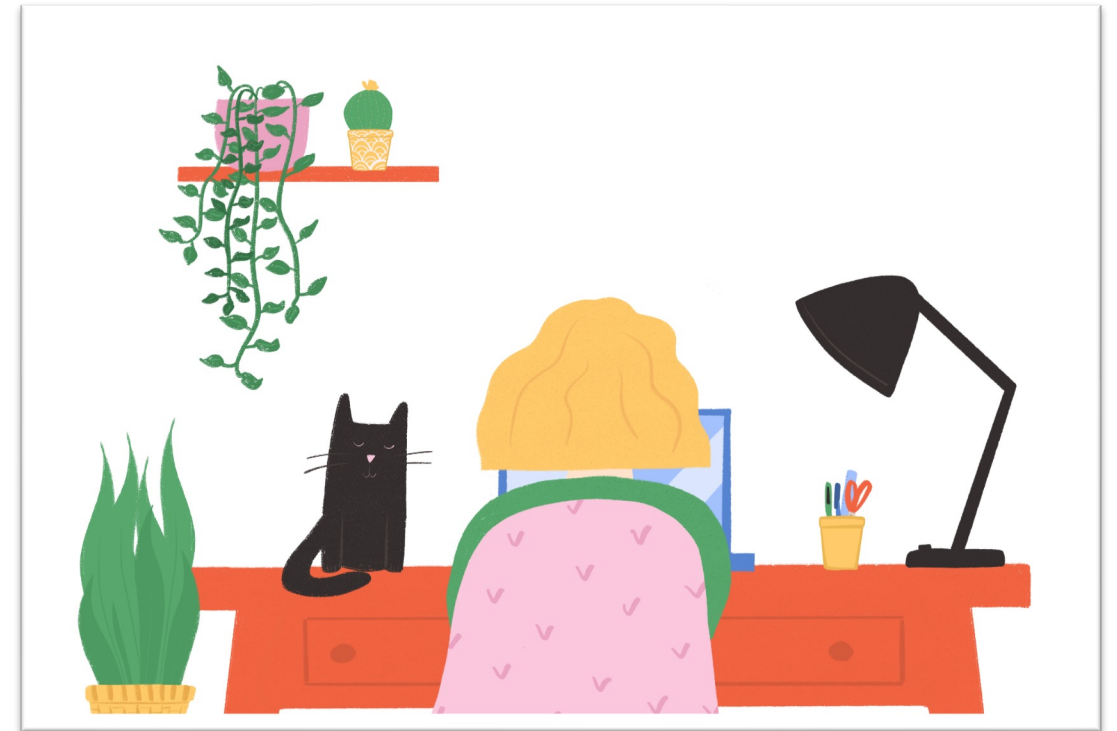
imagining a kind Compassionate person



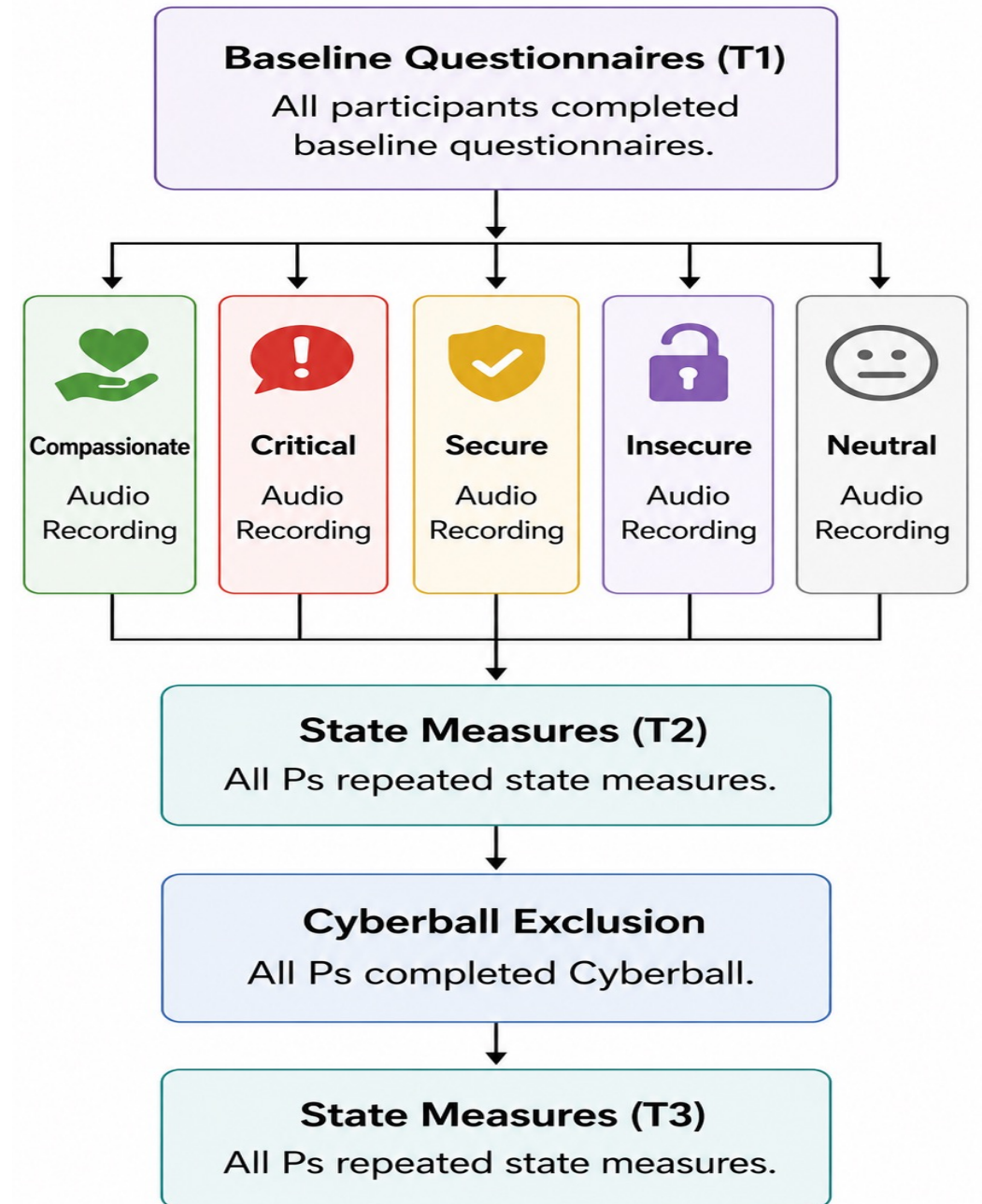
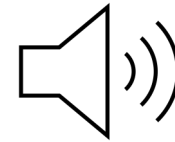
Examining the Influence of Mental Imagery and Social Exclusion on Paranoid Thinking in Adolescents

Tierney-Sutton et al., 2026 (under review)

- ✓ Online study (Qualtrics)
- ✓ UK adolescents
- ✓ 15-17 years old
- ✓ N = 497



Method



Some Key Findings

Compassionate and secure imagery groups: lower paranoia compared to insecure group following imagery task. Secure group showed decrease in paranoia following imagery task

→ secure imagery may be helpful for managing elevated paranoia in adolescents

However, secure, compassionate, and critical groups showed **increase in paranoia** following **Cyberball exclusion**

→ More **robust intervention** needed to help buffer young people from the negative effects of stressful social experiences



Next Steps: Targeting the Bullying → Paranoia Link: A Psychological Intervention

- I am developing a psychological intervention through schools to help teenagers experiencing bullying with feelings of mistrust and paranoia
- If you are interested in getting your school involved in developing the intervention or participating, please scan the QR code or email me on laura.tierney.2021@live.rhul.ac.uk





Questions?

Social Vulnerability and Paranoia in Teens



Key life stage for development of “social brain”: Brain areas associated with *theory of mind, mentalization, abstract thinking* and *introspection* undergo rapid growth



Re-orientation to peers: heightened importance of peer relationships and belonging: determines overall self-worth



Hyper-aware of potential for *negative social evaluation, fear of rejection*



Higher risk of negative social experiences: *bullying, cyberbullying, harassment* with a more corrosive impact



Feelings of vulnerability and threat i.e., paranoia may follow

How do we measure paranoia?

	Not at all					Totally
1. Certain individuals have had it in for me.	0	1	2	3	4	
2. People wanted me to feel threatened, so they stared at me.	0	1	2	3	4	
3. I was certain people did things in order to annoy me.	0	1	2	3	4	
4. I was convinced there was a conspiracy against me.	0	1	2	3	4	
5. I was sure someone wanted to hurt me.	0	1	2	3	4	
6. I couldn't stop thinking about people wanting to confuse me.	0	1	2	3	4	
7. I was distressed by being persecuted.	0	1	2	3	4	
8. It was difficult to stop thinking about people wanting to make me feel bad.	0	1	2	3	4	
9. People have been hostile towards me on purpose.	0	1	2	3	4	
10. I was angry that someone wanted to hurt me.	0	1	2	3	4	

Revised Green et al. Paranoid Thoughts Scale (R-GPTS; Freeman et al. 2021)