Systematic misperception of social relationships among adolescents (with Pablo Brañas-Garza, Friederike Mengel, & Mónica Vasco) PURE EMPIRICS AND VERY BEHAVIORAL/PSYCHOLOGY BUT WITH INTERESTING ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Abstract:
Social networks shape health, social, and economic outcomes, yet little is known about how accurately individuals perceive their relationships in natural social environments. We collected data from 2,638 adolescents across 107 classrooms, reconstructing complete networks of friends, best friends, enemies, and worst enemies, alongside individuals' predictions of who would nominate them in each layer. Perceptual accuracy was strikingly low: only 0.15% of adolescents correctly identified all their relationships. Misperceptions were systematic: accuracy was higher for positive than antagonistic relationships, for weaker than stronger ties, and underestimation was substantially more common than overestimation. Importantly, metaperceptual accuracy have real-life consequences that differ across relational domains: accurately identifying friendship nominations was associated with greater social integration, better academic achievement, higher well-being, and lower bullying involvement, whereas accurately identifying antagonistic nominations was associated with worse academic achievement, greater exposure to hostility and poorer psychosocial outcomes. These findings reveal that metaperception is not simply a domain-general cognitive ability but a relationship-specific process reflecting adolescents' embeddedness in supportive and antagonistic social environments.