



Competence in Romantic Relationships: A Developmental Cascades Analysis Spanning 20 Years

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Introduction

- Romantic relationships are a near universally experienced aspect of human development, although definitions of competence may vary by culture.
- In developmental theories of competence, romantic competence is viewed as an age-salient developmental task (DT) of adulthood. Success or failure in this DT is assumed to depend in part on earlier success or failure in DTs of childhood and adolescence (e.g. peer relationships, proper behavior, school achievement).
- Existing work indicates a unique contribution of social competence in peer friendships to the development of competence in the romantic domain.
- Some theories posit that externalizing behavior in early adolescence may result in increased romantic involvement. Theory also suggests that romantic relationships may be protective in some situations, facilitating desistance from problematic behaviors in adulthood.
- Longitudinal studies on the development of romantic competence are rare.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to test alternate models on the childhood origins of romantic competence through the examination of links between salient domains of competence across a 20 year span.

Methods

Sample

Data in this study were drawn from a 20-year longitudinal study of competence and resilience with a sample of 205 children (91 boys and 114 girls) and their families.

Procedure

- Children were recruited when they were between 8 and 12 years old.
- The cohort was followed up after 7, 10, and 20 years.
- The sample had retention rate of 90% at the 20 year assessment.
- Extensive multi-method, multi-informant data were collected at each time point.
- The current study utilized data collected during the initial enrollment and at the 10 and 20 year follow-ups.

Measures

Childhood (~ 10 years old)

- Interviews and ratings (Target, Parent, and Teacher)
- Revised Class Play (Peers)
- Devereux (Teacher)
- GPA and Peabody Individual Achievement Test

Emerging Adulthood (~ 20 years old, 10 year follow-up)

- Interview and ratings (Target and Parent)
- Status Questionnaire and ratings (Target and Parent)
- Clinical Ratings

Early Adulthood (~ 30 years old, 20 year follow-up)

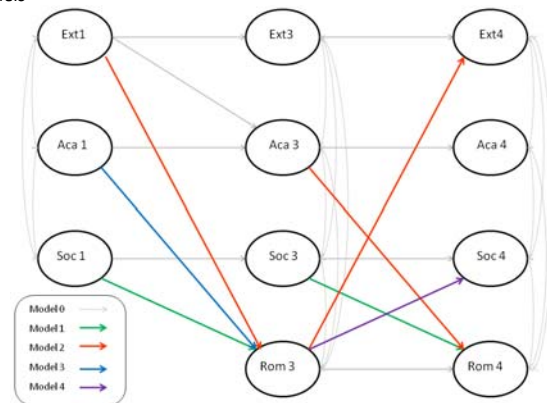
- Status Questionnaire and ratings (Target and Parent)
- Harter Scales (Target)
- Clinical Ratings

Analyses

Five nested models were tested using maximum likelihood structural equation modeling, conducted in Mplus (Muthen and Muthen, 2008).

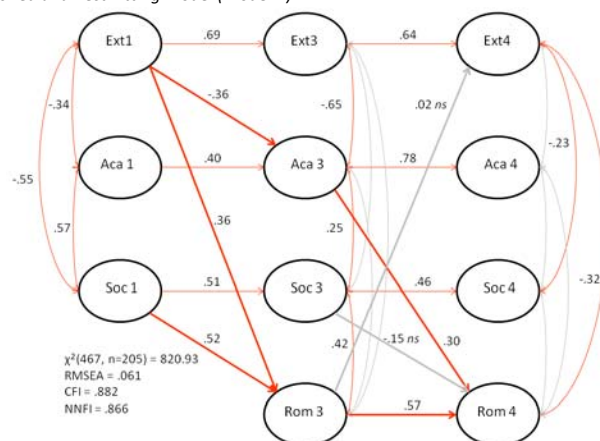
- Model 0: Within time construct covariances and continuity paths within domain
- Model 1: Adds direct social competence pathways
- Model 2: Adds direct, indirect, and transactional paths from externalizing behavior
- Model 3: Adds academic competence paths
- Model 4: Adds transactional path from romantic competence in emerging adulthood to social competence in romantic competence

Tested Models



Results (in progress)

Hypothesized and Best Fitting Model (Model 2)



Discussion

Current Study to Date

- Results support previous findings suggesting that social competence in childhood is an important precursor to the development of romantic competence in emerging and early adulthood
- Results suggest that rule-breaking behaviors in childhood may have a direct and positive effect on the development of romantic competence in emerging adulthood, consistent with earlier findings. It is possible that individuals who engage in rule-breaking behaviors are more outgoing and less inhibited in the initiation of romantic relationships. These behaviors may also index social dominance, which could be attractive in adolescence.
- In addition to this direct pathway, results suggest a possible cascade effect in which rule-breaking behavior in childhood has a negative indirect effect on romantic competence in early adulthood through its impact on academic competence in emerging adulthood. Rule-breaking behavior in childhood likely undermines academic achievement in emerging adulthood, which in turn may undermine interest from potential romantic partners, perhaps in relation to work success or financial security.
- A developmental shift in the role of rule-breaking behavior is suggested in these results. Whereas rule-breaking behavior in childhood significantly predicts romantic competence in emerging adulthood, early adulthood engagement in rule-breaking behavior is negatively associated with romantic competence. As young people move into adulthood, appealing characteristics in romantic partners may shift from rule-breaking to rule-abiding behavior (which is also associated with economic and work success).

Future Goals of this Work

- Improving the overall fit of the longitudinal models.
- Testing the potential moderating role of gender in the development of romantic competence.
- Exploring the role of personality, work competence and economic success in relation to romantic competence.