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Understanding Relational Competence in Emerging Adult Adoptees: A New Way to Conceptualize Competence in Close Relationships

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Understanding Relational Competence in Emerging Adult Adoptees: A New Way to
Conceptualize Competence in Close Relationships

A Thesis Presented

by

KRYSTAL K. CASHEN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING RELATIONAL COMPETENCE IN EMERGING ADULT ADOPTees: A NEW WAY TO CONCEPTUALIZE COMPETENCE IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

FEBRUARY 2018

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Relatively little research has focused on the positive adjustment of emerging adult adoptees (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Given the developmental context of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), it is important to select a measure of adjustment that reflects the increased ambiguity seen in this time period. The present study aims to develop and validate a measure of *relational competence*, or competence in one's closest relationship regardless of relationship type (i.e., romantic vs. nonromantic). This measure will be created by adapting the Romantic Competence Interview, a measure of romantic competence previously used with emerging adults (Shulman, Davila, & Shachar-Shapira, 2011). Participants included 162 emerging adult adoptees who were recruited as part of a larger longitudinal study (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013). Indicators of relational competence were selected from measures of intimacy maturity coded from interviews in which participants discussed their self-identified closest relationship (White, Speisman, Costos, Kelly, & Bartis, 1984). Confirmatory factor analysis showed that the proposed model of relational competence was a good fit to the data and that this

model was invariant across relationship type and gender. No differences in relational competence scores were found by relationship type or by gender.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Understanding the adjustment of adoptees is a central concern for both adoption researchers and professionals who work with adoptive families. While the majority of the research on the adjustment of adoptees has focused on childhood and adolescence, relatively little work has examined the adjustment of adoptees during emerging adulthood (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Emerging adulthood is a unique developmental context associated with prolonged exploration and increased instability (Arnett, 2000, 2015). Therefore, it is important to use a measure of positive adjustment that will capture adoptees' progress towards meeting the developmental tasks of this age while also accounting for variability in life trajectories associated with such exploration and instability. For emerging adults, one salient developmental task is forming a committed romantic relationship (Erikson, 1974; Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen., 2004). The relational context of adoption may make this developmental task particularly salient for adoptees.

Despite this developmental emphasis on romantic relationships, I propose that it is more informative to conceptualize adjustment for young adult adoptees through their ability to form and maintain a close relationship regardless of the type of that relationship, which I call *relational competence*. Relational competence differs from previous conceptualizations of social/friendship competence (e.g., Masten, et al., 1995; Roisman, et al., 2004) in that relational competence focuses on a particular relationship –

the individual's self-identified closest relationship – rather than focusing more generally on multiple peer relationships. In this way, relational competence more closely reflects previously used conceptualizations of romantic competence (e.g., Roisman, et al., 2004; Shulman, Davila, & Shachar-Shapira, 2011) in that it aims to capture an individual's approach to a specific highly close relationship.

Although romantic and platonic relationships can and do serve distinct functions for emerging adults (Fuhrman, Flannagan, & Matamoros, 2009), examining their competence in close relationships broadly defined rather than solely in romantic relationships, offers several advantages. For one, the boundaries between nonromantic friendships and romantic relationships have become more ambiguous in emerging adulthood, and it is more difficult to distinguish between the two. An example of such ambiguity can be seen in emerging adults' increasing engagement in casual sexual relationships (i.e., "friends with benefits") in which partners are physically intimate without the label or expectations of a romantic relationship (e.g., Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Additionally, both friendships and romantic relationships are associated with other aspects of emerging adults' wellbeing. Friendships and romantic relationships are also developmentally linked and several of the same skills needed to build successful friendships are necessary for building successful romantic relationships (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Furthermore, examining relational competence rather than romantic competence may provide a fuller picture of the adjustment of emerging adult adoptees who are not involved in romantic relationships for reasons not related to their ability to do so (i.e. attending college or graduate school, instability in work situation).

In this literature review, I will begin by elaborating on the developmental context of emerging adulthood. Next, I will define what is meant by the term close relationships and outline the different types of close relationships considered to be involved in relational competence. Then, I will provide evidence for why competence in close relationships during emerging adulthood is a useful indicator of positive adjustment during this developmental period and how this may be particularly true for emerging adult adoptees. From there, I will make a case for why examining relational competence may provide a broader picture of relationship functioning than competency within a specific relationship type (e.g. romantic relationships). I will conclude by outlining how a measure for relational competence will be created through adapting a previously established measure of romantic competence in emerging adulthood.

Emerging Adulthood

The theory of emerging adulthood was first proposed by Jeffery Arnett (2000) as a way to understand the period of transition between adolescence and adulthood. Arnett argued that emerging adulthood is a developmental stage characterized by five main features: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and a sense of increased possibilities (Arnett, 2015). Some critiques have been raised of the theory of emerging adulthood including concerns over whether or not it can rightfully be considered a developmental stage and over whether the theory of emerging adulthood is generalizable to social classes other than the middle and upper classes (Côté, 2014). However, despite these critiques, the theory of emerging adulthood provides a useful framework for thinking about the unique social context facing many individuals between the ages of approximately 18 and 29 in the United States.

The unique social context facing today's emerging adults is partially influenced by a changing economy. For one, an increasing need for a college education combined with increasing tuition and student loan debt has led to greater financial dependence on parents (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). This greater dependence on parents is also seen in the fact that today's emerging adults are more likely to be living at home with their parents than those of previous generations (Furstenberg, 2010). Emerging adults today are also more likely to have a succession of unstable, short-term jobs than one long-term job as a result of both increased instability in the job market and emerging adults' desires to find jobs that are personally meaningful (Arnett, 2015; Danziger & Ratner, 2010).

Emerging adults today are also delaying marriage (Furstenberg, 2010). This may be for economic reasons but may also be due to changing social norms regarding marriage (Arnett, 2015; Danziger & Ratner, 2010). Emerging adults are no longer facing pressure to be married by a certain age and are placing a higher value on finding the right partner who shares their interests beliefs and values (Arnett, 2015). This delay in marriage has led to an increase in exploration of other types of relationships. These non-marital relationship types may range from friendships to casual sexual relationships such as friends with benefits relationships to cohabitating romantic relationships (Arnett, 2015; Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013).

Overall, today's emerging adults show greater fluidity in the paths they take during the transition to adulthood than in previous generations. As this type of fluidity becomes more and more normative, it is important that we develop ways of conceptualizing what it means to be a competent, well-adjusted emerging adult that transcends the various paths that emerging adults might take.

Close Relationships

Close relationships are those in which two individuals show strong and frequent interdependence over a period of months or years (Kelley, et al., 1983). It has also been theorized that close relationships include an expansion of one's sense of self to include the close relationship partner (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Under this definition, close relationships may include such relationship types as friendships, romantic relationships, and parent-child relationships. For the purposes of the proposed study, only egalitarian close relationship types in which relationship partners are considered to be peers will be examined; parent-child relationships will therefore be excluded from my conceptualization of close relationships (Collins & Madsen, 2006). Furthermore, close relationship types will be categorized in the proposed study as either romantic or nonromantic (e.g., friend, cousin, etc).

Relational Competence as Positive Adjustment

One way of conceptualizing positive adjustment is through an individual's demonstrated *competence*, defined as a pattern of effective performance on salient developmental tasks (Masten, et al., 1995). For emerging adults in general and adoptees in particular, relational competence is a particularly important aspect of positive adjustment to examine for several reasons. For one, forming romantic relationships is a salient developmental task for emerging adults. Additionally, the relational nature of adoption makes adjustment in this domain particularly relevant for adoptees. Furthermore, functioning in close relationships has been associated with other aspects of health and wellbeing.

Close Relationships as a Developmental Task. The development of close relationships (and romantic relationships in particular) has long been theorized to be an important developmental task for emerging adults (Erikson, 1974; McCormick, Luo, & Masten, 2011). Empirical evidence has also supported the idea that the establishment of these relationships is a salient developmental task during this age. Researchers have pointed to stronger associations between engagement in romantic relationships and adjustment in emerging adulthood than in adolescence as evidence that the development of romantic relationships is a salient developmental task for emerging adults. Furman & Collibee (2014) found that, during adolescence, being in a romantic relationship was linked to higher levels of substance use, externalizing symptoms, and internalizing symptoms, whereas the opposite was true for emerging adults in romantic relationships. In another study, the association between romantic relationship quality (measured as greater support, fewer negative interactions, and greater relationship satisfaction) and internalizing symptoms was stronger for emerging adults than it was for adolescents (Collibee & Furman, 2015). This increased link between close relationships and adjustment in emerging adulthood seems to indicate the developmental salience of close relationships during emerging adulthood. Therefore, examining relational competence provides a useful understanding of how an individual is adjusting to the developmental demands of emerging adulthood.

Close Relationships of Emerging Adult Adoptees. While close relationships may be on the minds of all emerging adults, the relational nature of adoption may make close relationships particularly salient for emerging adult adoptees. Adoption, by definition, involves the separation of one family to form a new one. While in many cases

adoption may provide the adoptee with a better quality of life, the process of adoption can also result in feelings of loss of their birthparents and rejection (Jones, 1997). These experiences may translate in to interpersonal difficulties for adoptees. Specifically, researchers have examined how being adopted is related to adoptees' attachment. In one meta-analysis of adopted children (van den Dries, Juffer, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009), researchers found that children who had been adopted before their first birthday showed as much secure attachment as their nonadopted peers, but those who had been adopted after their first birthday showed less attachment security. Furthermore, adopted children were more likely to show disorganized attachment patterns regardless of when they were adopted.

Although relatively little work has examined the close relationships of emerging adult adoptees (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010), there is mixed evidence as to whether these interpersonal difficulties extend through emerging adulthood. In one study of emerging adults in the Netherlands, adoptees were less likely than nonadoptees to be married or involved in a romantic relationship. However, the emerging adult adoptees in this sample showed no differences in their relationships with romantic partners and less impairment in friendships than their nonadopted peers (Tieman, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2006). Findings from studies with adult adoptees show a similar pattern of results. Adult adoptees are more likely to show insecure attachment than nonadoptees (Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000; Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2007). Fenney and colleagues (2007) also found that for adult adoptees ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.76$), recent relationship problems were predictive of attachment insecurity while there was no association between relationship problems and attachment insecurity for nonadopted adults.

Additionally, Borders and colleagues (2000) found that adult adoptees ($M_{\text{age}} = 42$) received less support from friends than nonadoptees but showed no differences in marriage satisfaction or sensitivity to rejection in close relationships. The paucity of research on the close relationship functioning of emerging adult adoptees combined with the relevance of close relationships to the adoption context makes examining the relational competence of emerging adult adoptees a particularly informative way of measuring their positive adjustment during this developmental period.

Close Relationships and Wellbeing. In addition to the developmental salience of relationships, relational competence is a useful measure of adjustment during emerging adulthood because close relationships have been linked to other areas of adjustment such as health and wellbeing. Whether or not someone is in a romantic relationship has been linked to both mental and physical health during emerging adulthood. One study of young adults in Iowa and Georgia found that those individuals who are in high quality relationships (defined by greater commitment to the relationship, relationship satisfaction, and partner warmth in addition to lower partner hostility and partner antisociality) show fewer depressive symptoms and higher ratings of physical health than those who are not currently in a relationship; these effects also seem to accumulate over time (Barr, Culatta, & Simons, 2013). Additionally, being in a committed romantic relationship during emerging adulthood has been associated with reductions in heavy drinking and marijuana use in comparison to those not in romantic relationship (Fleming, White & Catalano, 2010).

Other studies have shown that relationship quality may be important for wellbeing above and beyond relationship status. Barr, Culatta and Simons (2013) found that those

individuals in low quality relationships (defined as lower in commitment, satisfaction, and partner warmth as well as higher in partner hostility and partner antisociality) fared similarly to individuals who were not in a relationship. Additionally, a study of married couples found that individuals with patterns of low quality across their close relationships (including spouse, friends, and family) showed more depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem than those with high quality relationships (Birditt & Anotucci, 2007).

Friendship insecurity has also been related to greater presence of personality disorder symptoms and elevated scores on the MMPI-2 during emerging adulthood (King & Terrance, 2006; King & Terrance, 2008). While the specific relationship traits used to define quality of relationships vary across studies, high quality relationships have been generally defined as those high in positive aspects of the relationship (i.e. commitment, warmth) and low in negative aspects (i.e. partner hostility). Researchers have also found that increased romantic and peer involvement over the transition to adulthood are linked with higher levels of variables related to well-being such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and social support (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004).

Competence Across Relationship Type

Previously, competency in romantic relationships and competency in friendships have been examined separately (e.g., Masten et al., 1995, Roisman, et al., 2004).

However, there is significant conceptual overlap between friendships and romantic relationships. This overlap can be seen both over time as romantic relationships begin to emerge in adolescence and within the developmental context of emerging adulthood.

Relational competence therefore adds to the existing literature on competency in close

relationships by capturing emerging adults' abilities within this shared set of skills and abilities.

Development of Romantic Relationships Through Friendships. Friendships hold unique importance as our first close, voluntary relationships (Collins & Madsen, 2006). They have been characterized by emotional support, reciprocity, trust, intimacy, and shared activities (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). During adolescence, friendships become qualitatively different than those seen in childhood. For one, intimacy in close friendships becomes more consistently associated with adjustment during adolescence (Buhrmester, 1990). Conflict resolution skills also appear to improve over the course of adolescence (Laursen & Collins, 1994).

During adolescence, individuals also start to become more involved in romantic relationships while also maintaining friendships (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Adolescents' friend groups facilitate romantic involvement both by providing opportunities for interacting with potential partners and providing models for romantic interactions (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004). While romantic relationships differ from friendships in that they have an additional romantic and/or sexual component (Furman, 1999), research suggests that friendships provide an opportunity for individuals to learn the skills necessary to maintain successful romantic relationships (Collins, et al., 2009).

For one, studies on working models, or mental representations of relationships that influence both one's own relational thoughts and behaviors and one's expectations about the relational thoughts and behaviors of others (Bowlby, 1979), indicate that there are overlapping working models of the two relationship types. In one study of high

school seniors (ages 16-19), adolescents' working models of friendships were significantly correlated with their internal working models of romantic relationships (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002). In contrast, working models of relationships with parents and working models of romantic relationships were not significantly correlated in the same study. These findings suggest that late adolescents conceptualize friendships and romantic relationships as more similar than other relationship types such as parent-child relationships.

In addition to overlapping representations, friendships and romantic relationships share many qualities (Furman, 1999). When asked to describe the advantages of having a romantic partner, adolescents list features such as intimacy and support (Feiring, 1996), which are similar to features seen in friendships (Buhrmester, 1990). Adolescents also show similar communication skills in observed interactions with friends and romantic partners (Furman & Shomaker, 2008). Additionally, observer ratings of rank-ordered social competency in middle childhood have been associated with security with dating partners and intimacy in romantic relationships in adolescence (Collins, Hennighausen, Schmit, & Sroufe, 1997). The findings suggest that the skills and qualities developed in friendships are carried over in to romantic relationships.

Although the focus in the extant literature on friendships as a medium for learning about romantic relationships has been on adolescents, there is evidence to suggest that relationship skills continue to develop through emerging adulthood. For example, conflict management skills continue to build through emerging adulthood, potentially as a result of continued cognitive development (Collins & Madsen, 2006; Weinstock & Bond, 2000). Additionally, levels of perceived intimacy in daily interactions with best friends

have been shown to increase over emerging adulthood (Reis, Lin, Bennett, & Nezlek, 1993). Since these skills are still developing throughout emerging adulthood, it may be the case that emerging adulthood's friendships serve as a similar opportunity for developing relational skills and abilities function as adolescent's friendships. If this is the case, then examining an emerging adult's relational competence may provide an understanding of the development of that shared skill set by allowing us to see how those abilities are being applied in an individual's closest relationship regardless of the relationship type (see Figure 1).

Close Relationships in Emerging Adulthood. Despite the developmental emphasis on romantic relationships in emerging adulthood, the line between romantic relationships and friendships may be becoming more blurred for emerging adults. Today's emerging adults are getting married at later ages compared to those in previous generations. In 2007, around 15% of individuals in the United States between the ages of 18 and 24 were married compared to around 30% in 1980. For individuals between the ages of 25 and 29, around 40% were married in 2007 compared to around 65% in 1980 (Furstenberg, 2010). This delay in marriage has been associated with an increase in exploration of other types of relationships. These non-marital relationship types may range from friendships to casual sexual relationships to cohabitating romantic relationships (Arnett, 2015; Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Additionally, research has shown that emerging adults who are not romantically involved rely more heavily on their friends for social provisions such as companionship and intimacy than those who are romantically involved (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998). This suggests that emerging adults who are not in romantic relationships may instead be turning to friendships to fill some of

the same needs that would have otherwise been met by a romantic relationship partner. This increased ambiguity in boundaries between romantic and platonic relationship types seen in emerging adulthood today implies the need for a conceptualization of competence in close relationships across relationship types that can be used to assess the adjustment of individuals in this age range.

To account for the increased fluidity in romantic relationships seen during emerging adulthood, Shulman and Connolly (2013) proposed a new understanding of theories of romantic stage development during emerging adulthood. According to their proposal, the central task in romantic development for emerging adults is learning to balance their dyadic commitments with their own individual aspirations (i.e., career goals, schooling). The authors argued that even emerging adults who are psychologically ready for committed, long-term romantic relationships might instead be investing their time and energy into other developmentally relevant tasks such as building a career or attending school. Because emerging adults' actual involvement in romantic relationships may therefore not be indicative of their relationship capabilities, we suggest that it may also be important to consider their ability to apply these dyadic skills in other close relationships. In other words, it is possible that emerging adults may be developing their ability to balance dyadic commitments with individual aspirations in platonic relationships in a way similar to how adolescents develop intimacy, communication, and other dyadic skills in friendships.

Developmental Cascade Analyses of Close Relationship Functioning

Developmental cascade analyses of close relationship functioning may also point to the significance of a shared set of skills and abilities between romantic relationships.

Developmental cascades refer to the accumulation of effects stemming from interactions between systems, which leads to a spreading of effects across systems and over times. In terms of competence, this has been discussed as the idea that competence in one domain becomes the basis for success in later, newly emerging domains (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). This kind of developmental cascade has been seen in analyses of competency in friendships and romantic relationships. For example, Oudekerk and colleagues (2015) found evidence for a developmental cascade of autonomy (using reasoning and expressing confidence) and relatedness (expressing warmth and collaborativeness) in interactions with friends and romantic partners from adolescence in to emerging adulthood. Specifically, autonomy and relatedness with friends at age 13 predicted autonomy and relatedness with both friends and romantic partners at age 18. Furthermore, autonomy and relatedness with romantic partners at age 21 was predicted by both autonomy and relatedness with friends and romantic partners at age 18 while autonomy and relatedness with friends at age 21 was predicted by autonomy and relatedness with romantic partners at age 18. Another developmental cascade analysis by Roisman and colleagues (2004) provides evidence that emerging adults' close friendships may be just as (if not more) predictive of their romantic functioning later in adulthood as their romantic relationships. The researchers found that romantic competence in adulthood (around age 30) was predicted by friendship competence in emerging adulthood but was not predicted by romantic competence at that age. The authors suggest that because romantic relationships are a newly salient developmental task in emerging adulthood, competence in an already established developmental task such as friendships plays a more important role in romantic competence in adulthood.

The evidence presented in the above developmental cascade analyses suggests that although the developmental focus has been on romantic relationships, competencies developed in platonic relationships may also be important for the salient developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. In this way, the shared set of dyadic skills and abilities between romantic and nonromantic relationships captured by relational competence may be conceptually similar to the “spillover” between competencies in friendship and romantic relationships seen in developmental cascade analyses.

Relational Competence: The Current Study

The aim of the current study is to propose a model and validate a measure of relational competence to be used as a measure of positive adjustment for emerging adult adoptees. My model of relational competence is adapted from a previously established model of romantic competence of older adolescents and emerging adults (Atzil-Slonim, Reshef, Berman, & Peri, 2016; Shulman, Davila, & Shachar-Shapira, 2011). Using a developmental tasks perspective, Shulman, Davila, and Shachar-Shapria (2011) adapted the Romantic Competence Interview developed by Davila and colleagues (2009) to better capture romantic competence for individuals nearing the end of adolescence. Their model of romantic competence included four components: 1) level of romantic involvement, 2) maturity of social cognitive perception of romantic relationships, 3) romantic agency, and 4) coherence. Level of romantic involvement was measured on a scale that ranged from never having been romantically involved to currently involved in a relationship lasting for more than two months. Maturity of social cognitive perception of romantic relationships was defined as the extent to which individuals acknowledged mutuality in relationships and the importance of balancing their needs with their partners’ needs.

Romantic agency refers to the individual's ability to accurately perceive and cope with potential difficulties in their relationship. Finally, coherence was adapted from the Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1998) and reflects an individual's ability to present their relationship in a way that shows inner integration.

These four constructs used by Shulman, Davila, and Shachar-Shapira (2011) in the Romantic Competence Interview have been adapted to reflect skills necessary to maintain both romantic and nonromantic relationships in a developmentally appropriate way. Specifically, relational competence was measured using 1) the individual's reasons for being committed to their closest relationship (Commitment), 2) the individual's expressions of affection and caring in the relationship (Concern), 3) the manner in which the individual follows through on problems in the relationship to achieve a resolution (Responding), and 4) the quality of the individual's generalized thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding the relationship (Orientation).

Measures for these constructs come from ratings of interviews with emerging adult adoptees about their self-identified closest relationship. These interviews were coded for intimacy maturity using a framework adapted from work by White, Spiesman, Castos, Kelly, and Bartis (1984). According to White and colleagues, there are three levels of intimacy maturity: self-focused, role-focused, and individuated-connected. Self-focused individuals relate to their partner in a self-serving manner. Role-focused individuals relate to their partner in a way that is defined by social norms regarding relationship roles. Individuated-connected individuals are able to integrate their own needs with those of their partner and view their partner as a unique person. This framework is particularly useful for measuring relational competence, because higher

levels of intimacy maturity (i.e., scores in the individuated-connected range) would indicate that an individual has been able to successfully balance their own individual needs with dyadic commitment. As indicated earlier, finding this balance is an important part of romantic relationship development for emerging adults (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Theoretical and conceptual associations between the constructs selected from these interviews and the constructs used in the Romantic Competence Interview are discussed below and are presented in Figure 2.

Commitment. The Commitment intimacy maturity subscale was used in place of level of romantic involvement. Shulman and colleagues (2011) included level of romantic involvement as an indicator of romantic competence with the rationale that staying involved in a lasting relationship is indicative of greater romantic competence. Using the Commitment subscale will allow us to capture not only whether someone is committed to a lasting relationship but also whether they are doing so in a developmentally appropriate way. Rather than directly measuring an individual's *level* of commitment to their relationship, the Commitment subscale measures *why* an individual wants to stay in the relationship. In this way, the Commitment subscale shows not only an individual's desire to maintain a close relationship, but also the motivation behind that desire. Individuals who score higher on the Commitment subscale show commitment to the relationship that is motivated by promoting a balance between strengthening the relationship and facilitating individual growth. Therefore, individuals who score higher on the Commitment subscale demonstrate reasons for being committed to their relationship that are in line with the developmental challenges of emerging adulthood.

Concern. The Concern intimacy maturity subscale was used in place of maturity of social cognitive perception of romantic relationships. Shulman and colleagues propose that those with higher levels of maturity of social cognitive perceptions would show an understanding of the mutuality of intimacy within a relationship and be sensitive to their partner's needs. Individuals who show greater levels of Concern would also show an awareness of balancing their own needs with the needs of their partner and engage in intimacy in an effort to strengthen the relationship. Therefore, there is considerable overlap in this definition of Concern and Shulman and colleagues' definition of maturity of social cognitive perception of romantic relationships.

Responding. The Responding intimacy maturity subscale was used in place of romantic agency. Romantic agency was used in the Romantic Competence Interview to measure an individual's ability to perceive romantic relationships in a realistic manner and their ability to address disagreements when they come up in a relationship. The Responding subscale measures the manner in which an individual handles conflicts when they arise. In this way, the Responding subscale and romantic agency both capture an individual's capacity for dealing with disagreements. Additionally, those who score high on the Responding subscale handle disagreements in a manner that will strengthen the relationship and prevent future disagreements. This preventative stance may indicate that these individuals show an awareness of conflict as a realistic part of relationships and would therefore also score high on romantic agency.

Orientation. Orientation was selected for inclusion in my measure of relational competence in place of coherence. Coherence, which has its roots in attachment theory (Main & Goldwyn, 1998), was included in the Romantic Competence Interview to

capture an individual's representation of their relationship by assessing how well the individual is able to produce an integrated narrative of that relationship. Although the definition of Orientation stems from a more Eriksonian understanding of intimacy (White, et al., 1986), it also captures an individual's representation of themselves in relation to their partner. Individuals who score high on the Orientation subscale are able to provide a description of their partner as a nuanced individual while also providing an integrated narrative of their relationship as one that promotes both individual and dyadic growth.

Study Aims

Whereas previous studies have measured the competence in romantic and nonromantic relationships separately, this study is among the first to measure competence in close relationships broadly defined. The aim of the present study is to develop and validate a scale of relational competence in emerging adulthood using confirmatory factor analysis. This scale measures an individual's ability to form and maintain developmentally appropriate close relationships by assessing the qualities of an individual's self-described closest relationship. To my knowledge, this is the first study to conceptualize competence in an individual's self-identified closest relationship during emerging adulthood across romantic and nonromantic relationships.

Research questions related to these study aims are outlined below. Specific hypotheses related to these research questions are discussed in the section labeled "Analytic Plan."

Research Question 1. Do the selected indicators (Commitment, Orientation, Concern, and Responding) of relational competence support a single latent factor model,

and does this model show measurement invariance across groups (i.e., romantic and nonromantic, men and women)?

Research Question 2. Will scores on the proposed measure of relational competence show good convergent and discriminant validity?

Research Question 3. Are there group differences in relational competence scores across relationship type and across gender?

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited as part of the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013). MTARP is a longitudinal study about the effects of openness in adoption for different members of the adoptive kinship network (e.g. adopted children, adoptive parents, birthparents, etc.). Target children had been adopted as infants by same-race parents through private domestic adoption agencies. Data for this study were collected during the third wave of MTARP data collection (2005-2008). Of the 169 adopted children who participated as emerging adults during the third wave of data collection, 162 provided information on their self-described closest relationship. Data from these participants were used in the current study. Participants ranged in age from 20.77 to 30.34 years ($M = 24.91$, $SD = 1.91$). The majority of participants identified as White (96%), and participants were evenly split between women ($n = 79$) and men ($n = 78$).

Table 1 shows information about the types of relationships as reported by the target emerging adult. Close relationships that were not described as romantic (e.g., friendships, friendships with ex-relationship partners, siblings, or cousins) were considered nonromantic. Close relationships that were described as short-term romantic partners, long-term romantic partners, engaged, or spouses were considered romantic. Men were more likely to identify their closest relationship as nonromantic than women ($\chi^2(1) = 5.00$, $p = .025$). Of those who reported on a nonromantic relationship, 1.4%

indicated that the current length of the relationship was 0-6 months, 2.8% said 6-12 months, 33.8% said 1-5 years, 23.9% said 6-10 years, and 38% said more than 10 years. For those in a romantic relationship, 1.1% indicated that the length of the relationship was 0-6 months, 7.7% said 6-12 months, 61.5% said 1-5 years, 24.2% said 6-10 years, and 3.3% said more than 10 years.

Procedure

Data collection occurred between 2005 and 2008. The target adopted emerging adults were contacted and given access through a unique username and password to a secure online site. The site contained links to a consent form, a secure chat site that was used to conduct three interviews, and eleven questionnaires. Some participants completed interviews by phone and questionnaires in paper format for reasons that included lack of internet access or not being comfortable with using an electronic format. Participants were compensated \$75 for completing all interviews and \$75 for completing all questionnaires.

Measures

Personal Interaction Interview. The Personal Interaction Interview (PII; White, et al., 1986) is a semi-structured interview in which participants discussed their closest relationship. Participants were allowed to identify their current/most recent relationship they considered to be closest, regardless of whether the person was male or female or whether it was a romantic relationship or not. Participants were advised not to choose their parents, children, pets, spiritual beings (e.g., God), people who were under the age of 18, and deceased persons. Interview questions asked about different aspects of the relationship such as shared and separate activities, how problems and differences are

managed within the relationship, expressions of caring, perceptions of involvement and commitment, and ideas about how the relationship could be improved.

Interviews were coded for intimacy maturity using a framework developed by White, Speisman, Costos, Kelly, and Bartis (1986). Four of the six intimacy maturity subscales coded for in the PII were selected for inclusion in the relational competence model based on their theoretical match with Shulman, Davila, and Shachar-Shapira's (2011) model: Commitment, Orientation, Concern, and Responding. The definition of each subscale is discussed more in depth below.

Each subscale was measured on a 9-point scale with higher scores indicating higher levels of intimacy maturity. Scores on this scale correspond to three levels of intimacy maturity: self-focused (1-3), role-focused (4-6), and individuated/connected (7-9). A self-focused level on maturity would indicate that the individual views their partner and the relationship in terms of their own wants and needs. Individuals with role-focused intimacy maturity describe their relationship in a way that focuses on social roles. These individuals may rely on stereotypes or socially acceptable generalizations of relationships when describing their own. An individuated/connected level of intimacy maturity indicates that an individual is able to differentiate and balance between their individual freedom and the connection with their partner.

Commitment. Commitment measured the reasons why an individual wanted to stay in the relationship they were reporting on. Individuals who scored high in Commitment provided reasons for being committed to the relationship that demonstrated a balance between wanting to strengthen the relationship and their own individual growth. Conversely, individuals who scored low on Commitment provided reasons for

being committed that indicated a self-serving motivation. Individuals who scored in the mid-range indicated that they were committed to the relationship out of obligation or duty.

Orientation. Orientation measured the generalized thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding the relationship. A participant who scored high in Orientation was able to describe their relationship as promoting both individual growth and a growing dyadic connection. These individuals are also able to describe their partner in a nuanced manner rather than by using flat social roles. Participants who scored low in Orientation described their relationship in a way that showed a self-serving perspective and described their partner in terms of how their partner fulfills their own wants, needs, and desires.

Concern. Concern measured expressions of affection and caring in the relationship. Participants who scored high in Concern were those who engaged in expressions of caring in an effort to promote a stronger relationship. These individuals demonstrated the ability to sense when their partner was in need and recognize the need for balance between their needs and the needs of their partner. Participants who scored low in Concern either showed expressions of affection and care that were self-serving or avoided such expressions for self-serving reasons

Responding. Responding was measured based on the way in which the participant followed through on problems in the relationship to achieve a resolution. Participants who scored high on responding engaged with problems with the intention of preventing future disagreements and strengthening the relationship. Alternatively, those who scored low in Responding either engaged in or avoided engaging in problems that were raised for self-serving reasons.

Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire. The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) is a self-report measure of adult romantic attachment relationship styles. The questionnaire includes two subscales for the attachment dimensions of anxiety and avoidance. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with statements indicative of an anxious or an avoidant attachment style on a 7-point Likert scale. Higher scores on the scales indicate greater levels of anxious or avoidant attachment. Because adult attachment has been linked to relationship functioning (Collins & Read, 1990), scores on the ECR subscales will be used to test for convergent validity of the relational competence scale.

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) is a 75-item questionnaire designed to measure an individual's style of attachment with his or her mother, father, and peers (25 items each). The IPPA assesses attachment styles across three dimensions: mutual trust, quality of communication, and extent of anger and alienation. Scores on each of these three dimensions were used to calculate an overall attachment score to the emerging adult's mother, father, and peers. Only attachment with peers will be used for the current study.

Adult Self-Report Job Scale. The Adult Self-Report (ASR; Achenbach & Rescolra, 2003) is a self-report measure of both adaptive functioning and behavioral problems. As part of the adaptive functioning scales, the ASR includes a subscale of items intended to measure functioning in the one's job. Examples of these items include "I do my work well," "I have trouble getting along with bosses." And "I do things that may cause me to lose my job." Raw scores on the Job scale are converted to normalized *T*

scores with higher scores indicating more adaptive behavior. *T* scores of less than 31 on the adaptive scales are considered to be of clinical concern.

Level of Education. Level of education was rated using a 6-point scale based on the participant's self-reported highest degree achieved. A GED/high school equivalency degree was indicated by a score of 0, a high school degree by a score of 1, an associates degree by a score of 2, a bachelors degree by a score of 3, a masters degree by a score of 4, and a doctoral/professional degree by a score of 5.

Analytic Plan

Research Question 1. Do the selected indicators of relational competence support a single latent factor model and does this model show measurement invariance across groups (e.g., romantic and nonromantic, men and women)?

Hypothesis 1a. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test a one-factor structure using all participants. Commitment, Orientation, Concern, and Responding were used as indicators. It was expected that the confirmatory factor analysis will show a good model fit for the proposed model.

Hypothesis 1b. In order to examine the question of whether the proposed structure of relational competence holds for both romantic and nonromantic relationships, multigroup confirmatory factor analysis was used to test for measurement invariance. It was expected that the relational competence model will show configural (i.e., same model specification), metric (i.e., same factor loading for each indicator), and residual invariance (i.e., same error variances of indicators) across relationship type.

Hypothesis 1c. Multigroup confirmatory factor analysis was also used to test for measurement invariance across participants who identified as men and participants who

identified as women. It was expected that the relational competence model will show configural, metric, and residual invariance across gender.

Research Question 2. Will scores on the proposed measure of relational competence show good convergent and discriminant validity?

Convergent and discriminant validity were evaluated using structural regression. Relational competence was modeled as a predictor of scores on the Experiences in Close Relationship Questionnaire, the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, the ASR Job adaptive functioning scale, and level of education.

Hypothesis 2a: Convergent Validity. Relational competence will show convergent validity with other relationship functioning measures.

It was expected that relational competence scores will be positively and significantly associated with the Peer subscales of the IPPA and negatively and significantly associated with the anxious and avoidant attachment scales of the ECR.

Hypothesis 2b: Discriminant Validity. The proposed measure of relational competence was expected to show discriminant validity with other measures of competence in other salient domains for emerging adults: career and education (Arnett, 2015; Roisman, et al., 2004).

As with convergent validity, discriminant validity was evaluated by examining the association between relational competence scores and scores on the ASR job adaptive functioning scale and level of education. To establish discriminant validity, relational competence scores should be less highly correlated with scores on the ASR or with level of education than with measures of convergent validity.

Research Question 3. Are there group differences in relational competence scores across relationship type and across gender?

While I hypothesize that the underlying structure for relational competence will be the same for members of different groups, the extant literature supports the idea that differences in levels may exist across groups. Therefore, my final research question is aimed at examining these potential differences. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare relational competence scores between those in romantic relationships and those in nonromantic relationships. The same procedure was used to examine potential differences in scores on the relational competence scale for men and women.

Hypothesis 3a. Scores on the relational competence scale will be significantly higher for those in romantic than those in nonromantic relationships.

Hypothesis 3b. Scores on the relational competence scale will be significantly higher for women than for men.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

In this section, preliminary data preparation steps are discussed first. Then, analyses and results for each research question are discussed in turn.

Data Preparation

Multiple imputation using PRELIS was used to address missingness in some of the study variables. Overall, 5.298% of all values across variables were missing and therefore imputed. Additionally, several variables were transformed to correct for skewness. Both the anxious (skewness = .290, $SE = .197$) and avoidant scales of ECR (skewness = .789, $SE = .197$) were initially positively skewed. A square root transformation was used for both scales to approximate a normal distribution. The resultant skewness statistics were in an acceptable range [-.112 ($SE = .197$) and .366 ($SE = .196$) respectively] (Kim, 2013). The IPPA peer scale was initially negatively skewed (skewness = -.783, $SE = .197$). Additionally, the order of magnitude of the IPPA scale was much greater than that of the other variable. As this could potentially cause problems for convergence in structural equation modeling by creating large differences in magnitudes of variances, IPPA scores were divided by 100. IPPA scores were then cubed to reduce skewness. The transformed scores approximated a normal distribution (skewness = -.293, $SE = .197$) (Kim, 2013).

Means and standard deviations of all variables prior to imputation are presented in Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of all imputed and transformed variables are presented in Table 3.

Relational Competence Factor Structure

To examine the first research question and test for the goodness of fit of a one-factor model, a confirmatory factor analysis was run using LISREL 8.8 in which all four subscales of relational competence loaded on to a single latent factor. This latent factor was scaled by setting the factor loading of Orientation to 1. A path diagram with standardized estimates of Model 1 is shown in Figure 3 below. Overall, Model 1 showed a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(2) = 0.138, p = 0.933$; RMSEA = 0.0, 90% CI [0.0, 0.0434]; CFI = 1.00; SRMR = 0.004). Proportion of variance explained by the relational competence indicators was calculated by squaring standardized factor loadings of each of the indicators. The latent factor of relational competence explained between 46.2% and 73.9% of the variance in the indicators.

Measurement Invariance

Romantic and nonromantic. To test for measurement invariance between those who reported on a romantic relationship and those who reported on a nonromantic relationship, a series of multigroup confirmatory factor analyses were used. To test for configural invariance, Model 2A held the structure of the model (i.e., all four indicators loaded on to a single latent factor) constant between those who reported on a romantic relationship and those who reported on a nonromantic relationship. Model 2A showed a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(5) = 5.451, p = 0.363$, RMSEA = 0.022, CFI = 0.999, SRMR = 0.066). To test for metric invariance (i.e., invariance of factor loadings), Model 2B held factor loadings of all indicators constant between the two groups. To test for residual invariance (i.e., invariance of indicator error variance), Model 2C constrained both factor loadings and error variances of the four indicators between the two groups. Delta chi-square tests were used to test for whether imposing these constraints resulted in changes

of goodness of fit. As seen in the model comparison table below (Table 4), neither Model 2B nor Model 2C resulted in a significant change in fit to the data. Because models in which the factor loadings (Model 2B) and error variances (Model 2C) of the indicators were held constant across groups were not a worse fit to the data than a model in which these parameters were allowed to vary between groups (Model 2A), we can infer that the factor loadings and error variances of the four indicators are similar for both groups. These findings provide support for measurement invariance across relationship type.

Women and men. As with relationship type, a series of multigroup confirmatory factor analyses was used to test for configural (Model 3A), metric (Model 3B), and residual (Model 3C) measurement invariance between men and women. Model 3A showed a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(5) = 4.902, p = .428, RMSEA = 0.0, 90\% CI [0.0, 0.15], CFI = 1.00, SRMR = 0.103$). Neither Model 3B nor Model 3C resulted in a significant change in fit to the data (see Table 5). This suggests that factor loadings for all four indicators and their error variances are equivalent across groups and therefore provides support for measurement invariance across gender.

Discriminant and Convergent Validity

To answer the second research question, a structural regression model (Model 4) that included relational competence as a predictor of all validity variables (i.e., ECR, IPPA, ASR Job scale, and level of education; see Figure 4) simultaneously was used to test for discriminant and convergent validity. Both the anxious and avoidant subscales of the ECR were entered in to the model as indicators of a latent factor of attachment insecurity. Because the ECR and IPPA both measure relational constructs, these factors were allowed to correlate. Overall, the model was a relatively good fit to the data ($\chi^2(25)$

= 38.417, $p = .042$, RMSEA = 0.057, CFI = .977, SRMR = .067). Contrary to the hypothesis, all validity variables were significantly related to relational competence (all p 's < .05). However, the magnitudes of the relationships did differ among the variables (see Figure 3). The absolute value of the standardized coefficients for the ECR ($\beta = -.29$) and IPPA ($\beta = .36$) were slightly higher than the coefficient for the ASR Job scale ($\beta = .19$). However, the coefficient for level of education ($\beta = .24$) did not differ much from the coefficients for the ECR and IPPA.

Group Differences in Relational Competence

The third research question was examined by using independent samples t-tests to test for potential group differences in relational competence. Factor scores of relational competence were generated through LISREL and were used for subsequent analyses. Means and standard deviations of relational competence by group are presented in Table 6. There was no significant difference in relational competence between those who reported on a romantic relationship and those who reported on a nonromantic relationship ($t(160) = .596, p = .552$). Similarly, there was no significant differences in relational competence scores between men and women ($t(160) = -.859, p = .391$).

A one-way ANOVA was used to test for a possible interaction between gender and relationship type. Four groups were created: women in a romantic relationship, women in a nonromantic relationship, men in a romantic relationship, and men in a nonromantic relationship. There were no significant differences between these groups [$F(3,158) = .461, p = .710$].

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to take the first steps towards developing and validating a measure of relational competence as a means of evaluating the competence that emerging adult adoptees demonstrate in their closest relationship. Taken together, the results of the present study provide initial support for the construct of relational competence. The proposed model of relational competence appeared to be a good fit to the data. Furthermore, this model was consistent across relationship type and gender. Contrary to our hypothesis, however, the findings provided ambiguous support for convergent and discriminant validity. While peer attachment scores were more highly correlated with relational competence than level of education and job competence, attachment insecurity scores in close relationships were about as correlated with relational competence as the measures of discriminant validity. Interestingly, however, there were no group differences between those who reported on a romantic and those who reported on a nonromantic relationship in relational competence scores or between men and women. Each of these findings will be discussed in more depth below.

Factor Structure and Measurement Invariance

The findings of the current study showed that the proposed model of relational competence was a good fit to the data. Furthermore, the latent factor of relational competence explained a substantial amount of variance in the selected indicators of relational competence (Commitment, Concern, Responding, and Orientation). Additionally, the structure of the model, relationship of the selected relational competence indicators, and the error variance of those indicators did not differ between

those who reported on a nonromantic relationship and those who reported on a romantic relationship. This finding supports the idea that there is an underlying set of skills and qualities that are evident in close relationships of all types during emerging adulthood and that this set is captured by our measure of relational competence. Our findings of measurement invariance between men and women suggest that relational competence may be a useful measure for both men and women.

Discriminant and Convergent Validity

The results of Model 4 provide inconclusive evidence for the convergent and discriminant validity of relational competence. It was hypothesized that relational competence would be more highly associated with other relationship measures (i.e., attachment insecurity, attachment to peers) than with measures of competence in other areas relevant to emerging adults (i.e., level of education and job competence). Contrary to this hypothesis, relational competence was significantly associated with all four measures. While relational competence was more highly associated with attachment to peers than level of education and job competence, attachment insecurity scores were only more highly correlated with relational competence than job competence.

While these findings may suggest that our measure of relational competence shows adequate convergent but not discriminant validity, there are two other possible interpretations of this pattern of results that are worth considering. For one, the ECR may not have been as good of a measure of convergent validity as expected because it is a measure of attachment *insecurity* rather than attachment *security*. Attachment insecurity has been associated with negative relationship outcomes (Feeney, Passmore, Peterson, 2013; Molero, Shaver, Fernandez, Alonoso-Arbiol, Recio, 2016). While it should be

expected that relational competence should be associated with fewer negative outcomes, it is not necessarily the case that the absence of negative outcomes guarantees positive relationship outcomes. In other words, an individual who scores low on the ECR may not exhibit the relational difficulties associated with attachment insecurity, but they may not necessarily possess the positive skill set associated with relational competence.

Another plausible explanation for the observed pattern of results is that all four measures are measures of competence even though they measure competence in different domains. In their longitudinal work on the development of competence, Masten and colleagues have shown that competence in one area of life is related to competence in other domains as well (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Masten, Desjardins McCormick, Kuo, & Long, 2010). Of particular relevance to the present study, one study found that for late adolescents (14-19 years-old), both social and romantic competence were significantly correlated with job and academic competence (Masten, et al., 1995). The authors interpreted this finding as suggesting that the interpersonal skills that led to competence in social and romantic relationships may also facilitate success in the workplace and in academic environments. A similar interpretation may apply to the findings of the present study; the skills and qualities that emerging adults use to foster their closest relationships may also serve them well in navigating interpersonal relationships with teachers, mentors, and bosses.

Group Differences

Contrary to our hypotheses, there were no differences in relational competence scores between those who reported on romantic relationships and those who reported on nonromantic relationships. It was initially hypothesized that those whose closest

relationship was a romantic relationship would show greater relational competence given both the developmental emphasis on romantic relationships (Erikson, 1974; McCormick, Kuo & Masten, 2011) and previous findings of better mental and physical health outcomes for those in a romantic relationship as compared to single emerging adults (Barr, Culatta, & Simons, 2013; Fleming, White, & Catalano, 2010). However, our finding that there were no differences by relationship type lends support to the idea that focusing primarily on romantic relationships may not provide a complete picture of emerging adult's close relationships. If emerging adults are showing a similar level of skills and qualities in their nonromantic closest relationships as in their romantic relationships, then this suggests that the quality of one's closest relationship may be more informative than the relationship type. Our findings that there were no differences in relational competence between men and women and that there was no interaction between gender and relationship type suggests that relational competence may be as useful an indicator of overall competency in close relationships for men as it is for women.

Implications

The results of the present study hold important implications for the way we conceptualize competency in close relationships for emerging adults. These findings suggest that there is an overlap in the skills and qualities that emerging adult adoptees demonstrate in their self-identified closest relationships. This relational competence may provide a broader insight in to the adjustment of emerging adults than the qualities and skills demonstrated in their romantic relationships alone. For example, individuals who demonstrated high relational competence in a nonromantic relationship may be

overlooked in studies that compare those in relationships to those who are not or may be left out entirely in studies that focus only on emerging adults in committed romantic relationships. Understanding relational competence will allow us to understand the ways in which emerging adults develop the skills necessary to (perhaps eventually) form committed romantic relationships as they navigate the transition to adulthood within a unique and changing social context (Arnett, 2015).

Additionally, the results of the present study address a gap in the current literature by examining the close relationships of emerging adult adoptees. On average, participant's scores on all indicators of relational competence fell in to a role-focused classification of intimacy maturity (White, et al., 1984). Individuals at this level tend to describe their relationship in terms of socially-prescribed roles. In White and colleagues (1984) original study on intimacy maturity in a sample of married emerging adults, participants average scores also fell in to the role-focused range. Similarly, participants in the present study showed similar scores on the ECR to samples from other studies. In one study of 328 college students conducted by Gentzler and Kerns (2004), men and women scored an average of 2.75 and 2.96 respectively on the Avoidant subscale and 3.79 and 3.84 respectively on the Anxious subscale. In the present study, the average score on the Avoidant subscale was 2.57 and the average score on the Anxious subscale was 3.16. Furthermore, Eberhart and Hammen (2006) found that the average score on the Peer Attachment scale of the IPPA was 116.18 which is only slightly higher than the average of 105.59 found in our sample.

While we cannot empirically say whether the scores of our sample statistically differ from those in other studies, the fact that these scores fall in a similar range provides

evidence against the idea that emerging adult adoptees necessarily face relationship difficulties. However, our sample contains only adoptees who had been adopted as infants through private domestic adoption in to same race families and who therefore may be at less risk for relationship difficulties than their peers who have been adopted through other means (van den Dries, et al., 2009) and may as such may more closely resemble a nonadopted sample. Further research on how experiences associated with other types of adoption (e.g., early trauma experience, transracial upbringing) may influence the development of relational competence is necessary to identify how processes and experiences related to adoption rather than one's status as an adoptee may contribute to relationship difficulties.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

There are several strengths of the present study that are worth noting. For one, the present study is among the first to examine the qualities of emerging adult's self-reported closest relationship regardless of relationship type. Participants were given minimal limitations on who they chose to ensure that the relationship was a peer relationship (as opposed to a parent-child relationship, for example). Allowing participants to self-identify their closest relationship allows participants to more accurately reflect their relationship experiences than if they were limited to a specifically defined relationship type. Additionally, interviewing participants about their experiences in a specific relationship rather than about relationships in general allows participants to provide concrete examples of the skills and qualities examined which may have increased the credibility of their responses. Furthermore, the indicators of relational competence were coded using in-depth interviews. Using these interviews provides a potentially more

nuanced measurement of relational competence than if participants had been asked to evaluate these measurements themselves on questionnaires, for example.

While the results of this study provide initial evidence in support of the construct of relational competence, further research is needed to understand the extent of its usefulness as a measure of positive adjustment for emerging adults. For one, the sample for the present study was comprised solely of adoptees who had been adopted through private domestic adoption as infants. Although there is no theoretical reason to believe that the structure of relational competence would differ between those who were adopted and those who were not, the construct of relational competence should also be validated in a sample of nonadoptees and in adoptees from diverse backgrounds.

For emerging adult adoptees in particular, future research should examine how factors related to one's experiences and identity as an adoptee may influence the development of relational competence. For example, how might adoptees' communication with their adoptive parents about their adoption contribute to their development of the relational skills necessary for relational competence? How might an adoptee's experiences of and satisfaction with their contact with birthparents or their affect towards their adoption be associated with their relational competence?

In addition to examining predictors of relational competence, it will be important to understand how relational competence in emerging adulthood may be associated with one's close relationships throughout adulthood. It is theorized here that emerging adults are building skills across different types of relationships that they will be able to draw upon as they enter in to committed romantic relationships. It will therefore be important to test empirically whether relational competence in emerging adulthood is predictive of

romantic competence later in adulthood and how the potential predictive power of relational competence compares to that of romantic competence in emerging adulthood.

Table 1. Relationship Types by Gender

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
Nonromantic		
Friend	26	23
Friend, ex-romantic	5	2
Sibling	9	3
Cousin	3	0
Total	43	28
Romantic		
Romantic, short-term	4	5
Romantic, long-term	10	21
Engaged	7	9
Spouse	18	17
Total	39	52

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Variables Prior to Imputation

	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Orientation	162	5.28	1.52
Concern	161	5.47	1.41
Commitment	159	5.04	1.45
Responding	159	5.19	1.80
Highest degree earned	159	1.79	1.08
ECR Avoidant	153	2.57	1.18
ECR Anxious	152	3.16	1.36
IPPA - Peer	152	105.59	13.82
ASR - Job	127	50.02	6.48

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of All Variables After Imputation and Transformations

	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Correlations</u>									
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Orientation	5.278	1.521	-									
2 Concern	5.463	1.406	.706**	-								
3 Commitment	5.043	1.442	.584**	.554**	-							
4 Responding	5.191	1.782	.647**	.607**	.521**	-						
5 Relational Competence††	0	1.313	.923**	.871**	.728**	.802**	-					
6 Highest degree earned	1.77	1.076	.251**	.206**	0.07	0.117	.218**	-				
7 ECR Avoidant†	1.567	0.355	-.194*	-.182*	-0.1	-.196*	-.207**	-0.101	-			
8 ECR Anxious†	1.739	0.384	-.166*	-0.151	-0.137	-.271**	-.208**	-0.028	.513**	-		
9 IPPA - Peer†	1.227	0.419	.288**	.335**	.196*	.238**	.325**	.253**	-.435**	-.298**	-	
10 ASR - Job scale	49.98	5.865	0.138	0.153	0.143	0.11	.161*	0.109	-.189*	-.247**	.298**	-

N = 162 *p<.05 **p<.01 †transformed variable ††factor score generated by LISREL

Table 4. Model Comparison Table – Romantic & Nonromantic

Model	Model χ^2	df	<i>p</i> value	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	<i>p</i> value
Configural Invariance (2A)	5.451	5	.363	—	—	—
Metric Invariance (2B)	8.219	8	.412	2.768	3	.429
Residual Invariance (2C)	10.185	12	.600	4.734	4	.316

Table 5. Model Comparison Table – Women and Men

Model	Model χ^2	df	<i>p</i> value	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	<i>p</i> value
Configural Invariance (3A)	4.902	5	.428	—	—	—
Metric Invariance (3B)	6.041	8	.643	1.139	3	0.768
Residual Invariance (3C)	6.498	12	.889	0.457	4	.978

Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations of Relational Competence by Relationship Type and Gender

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Overall</u>
Romantic	.056 (1.18)	-.201 (1.42)	-.055 (1.29)
Nonromantic	.153 (1.41)	.016 (1.33)	.070 (1.35)
Overall	.090 (1.25)	-.088 (1.37)	0 (1.31)

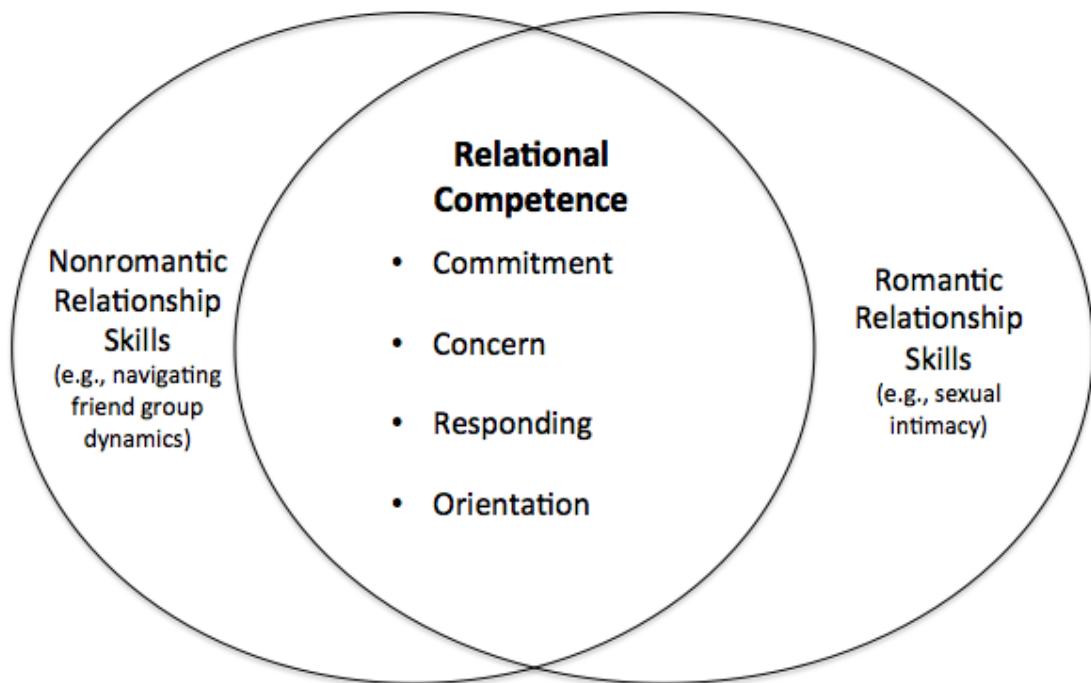


Figure 1. Relational competence as a set of skills and abilities shared between romantic and nonromantic relationships

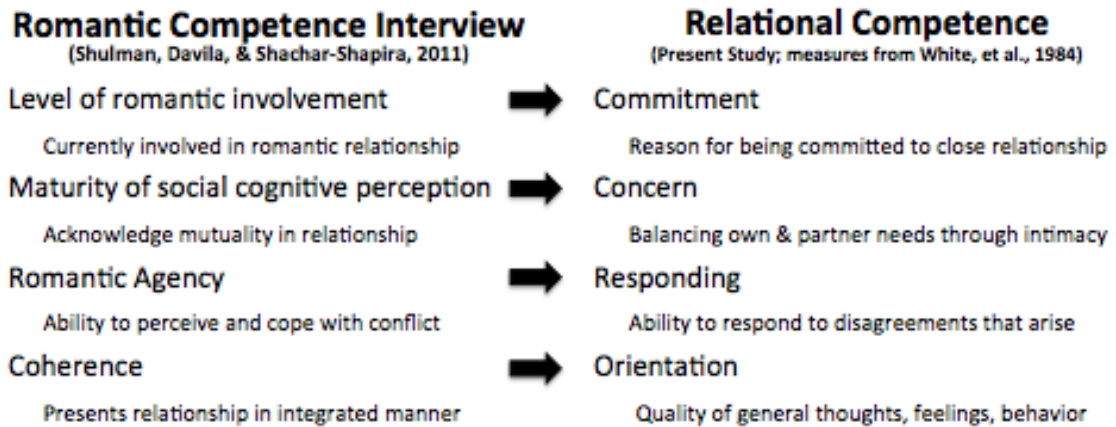


Figure 2. Comparison of indicators & definitions between Romantic Competence Interview and proposed relational competence measure

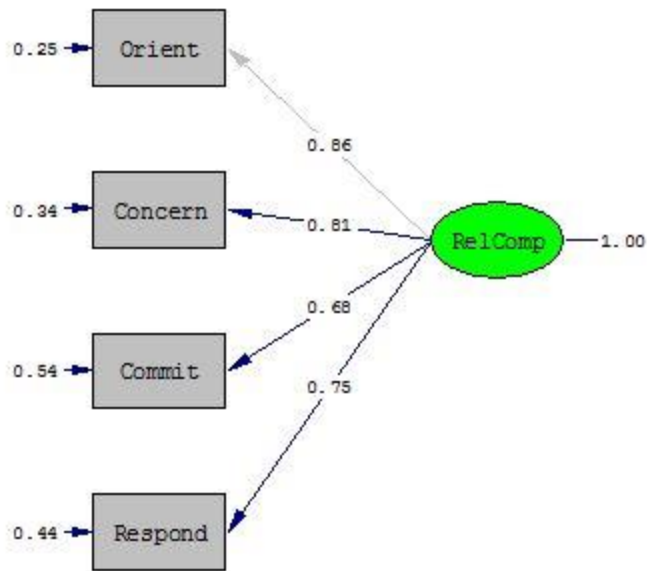


Figure 3. Standardized factor loadings of CFA of relational competence (Model 1). $N = 162$. RelComp = Relational Competence

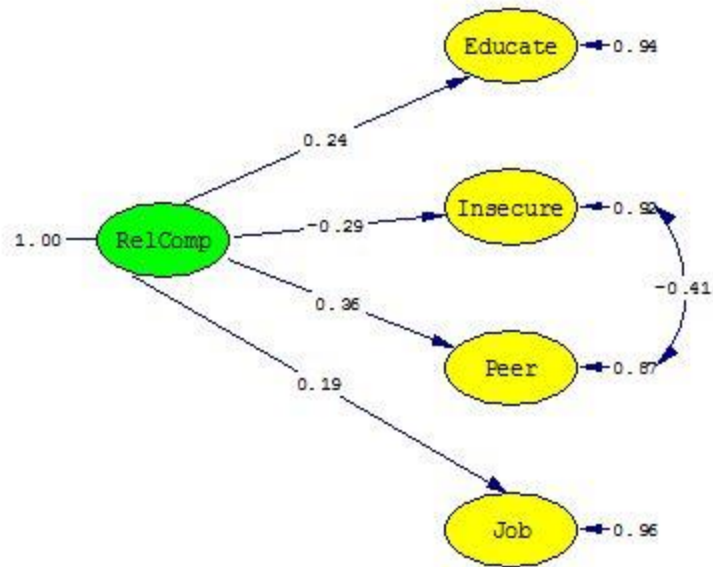


Figure 4. Standardized coefficients of structural regression (Model 4). $N = 162$. Indicators for outcome latent factors are as follows: Educate = level of education, Insecure = ECR Anxious and Avoidant subscales; Peer = IPPA peer attachment; Job = ASR Job scale

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