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Social Competence

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Overview

Social competence is vitally important for adolescents. Social difficulties experienced during youth, such as rejection by peers, predict significant difficulties later in life, including dropping out of school, criminality, and psychological disorders (Parker and Asher 1987). Concurrently, poor social functioning has been implicated in the maintenance of a number of psychological problems, including internalizing difficulties such as depression (e.g., Rudolph et al. 2000) and externalizing symptoms such as aggressive behavior (e.g., Dodge et al. 1985; Gaffney and McFall 1981). These associations lend urgency to the development of valid theoretical and measurement models of youth social competence. This entry outlines current thinking concerning definitions of this construct and the types of factors associated with variability in social competence. Measures of social competence are placed within this theoretical framework, and implications for intervention are discussed briefly.

Definitions and Theoretical Models of Youth Social Competence

A large body of work has been devoted to operationalizing and measuring youth social competence (see Ladd 2005 for review). Although there is significant heterogeneity in definitions of social competence (Dodge 1985), there is increasing consensus that the construct reflects effectiveness in interpersonal interactions (see Rose-Krasnor 1997). Moreover, theorists have identified four sources of variability in interpersonal effectiveness: (1) individual, (2) behavior, (3) situation (i.e., the interpersonal circumstances in which behavior is embedded), and (4) judge (i.e., who is evaluating the behavior; see Dirks et al. 2007a). To date, researchers have focused primarily on the first two factors. Clearly, characteristics of *individuals* will contribute to their social success. Researchers have identified a variety of individual- or child-level variables that are associated with social competence, such as having a sense of humor (Masten 1986). At the extreme end of this approach are trait models of social competence, which locate interpersonal effectiveness entirely within the individual (e.g., Vaughn et al. 2000). In other words, competence is a property of youth, who each possess this trait to a lesser or greater extent. This approach is appealing, perhaps to developmental psychologists in particular, as it provides a unifying construct that can be assessed across the life span. On the other hand, trait approaches to competence have been challenged both theoretically and clinically. Theoretically, McFall (1982) noted that the logic underlying this approach is circular: people behave competently because they are competent, but they are deemed competent because they behave competently. Clinically, localizing competence entirely within youth is problematic because it does not suggest targets for intervention. Once individuals who are struggling socially have been identified, how can clinicians help them to achieve social success?

One way to solve this problem is to examine the *behaviors* in which youth are engaging. Social behaviors are another source of variability in youth social competence, and social-skills models of competence equate behaviors and social competence (see McFall 1982). Numerous studies have examined social behaviors associated with good and problematic outcomes in the peer group (see Ladd 2005). For example, in general, aggressive and avoidant behaviors are associated with rejection by peers, whereas sociable actions are

associated with peer acceptance (see Newcomb et al. 1993). Within a social-skills approach to competence, youth who engage in "good" behaviors, would be seen as competent, whereas youth engaging in "problematic" behaviors would be seen as incompetent.

The challenge associated with locating competence exclusively in social behaviors becomes apparent almost immediately: How do investigators decide which behaviors are competent? Different researchers have suggested different criteria that might form the basis of these evaluations. As described earlier, some people have argued that interpersonal effectiveness is the benchmark for competence (see Rose-Krasnor 1997). Others have posited more specific criteria, such as meeting a goal (e.g., Erdley and Asher 1999). Although there is variability among researchers concerning how these judgments should be formed, there is a general agreement that social competence is an evaluative construct (see Dirks et al. 2007a). This idea of competence as an evaluation is reflected in McFall's (1982) definition of competence, which states that the construct of social competence "reflects somebody's judgment, on the basis of certain criteria, that a person's performance on some task is adequate" (McFall 1982, p. 13).

This definition of competence implicates the four sources of variability described previously: individual, behavior, situation, and judge. Despite their acknowledged theoretical importance, far less empirical work has examined situation- and judge-level factors. Social *situations* can affect behavior in at least two ways. First, they will influence the type of behaviors in which a person engages. Different situations will press for different actions; in general, youth should, and do, respond differently when they are shoved by a peer than when a peer says hello to them (see Shoda et al. 1994). Even within a relatively homogeneous class of situations, youth behavior shows marked specificity. For example, youth are significantly more likely to report that they would use physical aggression in response to physical provocation by a peer, compared to relational and verbal provocation (Dirks et al. 2007b). Second, not only will situations affect the behaviors that youth enact, but the social context of a behavior will likely also influence the perceived competence of that action. For example, peers evaluate children who have hit someone who hit or pushed them first more positively than they do children who

have used physical aggression unprovoked (Willis and Foster 1990). Such data hint that the same behavior, enacted in two different situations, may be perceived as more or less competent.

The other key feature that will influence judgments of competence is the identity of the person making them, or the *judge*. If competence is a judgment, then it is possible that the perceived competence of an action will vary depending upon who is evaluating. Very few empirical studies have examined this issue. Although inter-rater discrepancies in evaluations of youth social competence have been well-documented (see Renk and Phares 2004), the methodology of these studies does not allow for conclusions about the judge specificity of the perceived competence of specific behaviors. In general, these studies have assessed the extent to which peers, parents, and teachers agree about (1) the competence of a target child; or (2) the extent to which a target child engages in behaviors that are pre-judged to be competent (e.g., prosocial behaviors) or incompetent (e.g., aggression). In other words, they have assessed the extent to which there is agreement about *whether* a youth is liked or *what* a youth is like (see Parker and Asher 1987).

Such investigations leave unanswered the question of the extent to which important people in the social environment concur about the competence of specific behaviors. For example, do peers, parents, and teachers agree that physical aggression is an incompetent action? Work with adolescents suggests they may not. For example, one study found that in a sample of lower-income high school students, aggressive-disruptive behavior was associated positively with perceived popularity (Luthar and McMahon 1996). This finding suggests that at least some peers may view aggression as an appropriate and effective interpersonal strategy. Teachers, however, likely will not. Engaging in physical and verbal aggression are common reasons students are suspended from school (Mendez and Knoff 2003), suggesting disapproval of such behaviors among educators.

A recent study did in fact find significant differences between early adolescents' and teachers' judgments of the effectiveness of different responses to physical, verbal, and relational provocation by a peer (Dirks et al. 2010). In this study, youth and their teachers were presented with a number of possible responses to scenarios involving peer provocation, including physical,

173 verbal, and relational aggression (i.e., damaging or
174 threatening the aggressor's social relationships), seek-
175 ing an explanation for the provocation, telling the
176 aggressor that his/her actions are unacceptable, and
177 telling an adult. Participants rated how well each
178 response would "work to solve the problem."
179 As expected, youth evaluated physically, verbally, and
180 relationally aggressive responses to be more effective
181 than did teachers, whereas teachers evaluated responses
182 involving seeking an explanation to be more effective
183 than did youth. Importantly, within the group of youth
184 judges, some aggressive responses were viewed to be as
185 effective as assertive strategies. For both boys and girls,
186 ending one's relationship with the aggressor, a strategy
187 that could be construed as relationally aggressive (e.g.,
188 Delveaux and Daniels 2000), was deemed to be as
189 effective as seeking an explanation or stating that the
190 aggressor's actions were not acceptable. Furthermore,
191 boys also evaluated physical aggression to be as effective
192 as these strategies.

193 Illuminating these inter-judge discrepancies in
194 evaluations of behavior may provide insight into the
195 reinforcement contingencies that exist in youth's social
196 environments. Ultimately, such data may aid in the
197 development of more targeted interventions designed
198 to improve youth's social functioning. For example,
199 although physical aggression may be viewed as effective
200 by some peers, the consequences of such actions that
201 will result from adult disapproval can be severe (e.g.,
202 suspension or expulsion from school). Furthermore,
203 such actions are likely to cause significant harm and
204 distress to others. This discrepancy between peer sup-
205 port, on the one hand, and the possible negative con-
206 sequences for individuals themselves, as well as the
207 targets of their behavior, on the other, poses a unique
208 challenge for interventionists. In such situations, it may
209 be helpful for clinicians to work with youth to consider
210 who the most important judge in a given situation is.
211 Alternatively, youth may need assistance crafting
212 responses that are deemed to be acceptable by both
213 peers and adults, and that do not cause harm to others
214 around them.

215 **Measurement of Youth Social**
216 **Competence**

217 Taken together, the empirical evidence supports
218 increasingly the theoretical supposition that situation-
219 and judge-level factors will play a key role in youth

social competence. This more nuanced view of compe- 220
tence is typically not reflected in many of the instru- 221
ments used to measure this construct. Researchers 222
often assess social competence in one of two ways: 223
sociometric strategies and behavioral approaches (i.e., 224
nominations or rating scales). Sociometric techniques 225
are used to determine how well-liked a child or adoles- 226
cent is. A number of different approaches are used to 227
obtain this information (see Foster et al. 1993). When 228
working with adolescents, researchers typically use 229
nomination procedures. Students are asked to identify 230
the classmates that they like most and least, and these 231
nominations form the basis of classifications such as 232
popular (receives many liked and few disliked nomina- 233
tions) and rejected (receives many disliked and few 234
liked nominations; Inderbitzen 1994). Sociometric 235
techniques provide very valuable information 236
concerning individuals' popularity with their peers. 237
The limitations of these approaches have also been 238
widely documented. For example, sociometric analyses 239
assess popularity with respect to a particular reference 240
group, typically classmates at school. Adolescents often 241
have friends in multiple contexts (e.g., at their part- 242
time jobs, in their neighborhood); as such, sociometric 243
procedures may not provide complete information 244
regarding their social functioning (Inderbitzen 1994). 245

More generally, sociometric measurement indicates 246
whether or not youth are liked (Parker and Asher 247
1987), but provides no information about what they 248
may be doing to earn this designation (Bierman and 249
Welsh 2000). In other words, these techniques provide 250
data about individuals, but not about their behaviors. 251
To address this limitation, researchers will often assess 252
youth behavior directly. In general, this is done by 253
having peers nominate classmates who fit specific 254
behavioral descriptions (e.g., aggressive, avoidant; 255
Chung and Asher 1996). Alternatively, people knowl- 256
edgeable about the target individual, such as parents, 257
teachers, or the youths themselves, may be asked to 258
complete behavior rating scales. In general, these 259
types of measures ask informants to rate how often 260
youth engage in a variety of different behaviors. When 261
working with adolescents, it is essential that rating 262
scales assess behaviors that are relevant and important 263
for youth of this age. The types of behaviors required to 264
negotiate successfully the social tasks of this period, 265
which include increased experiences with the opposite 266
sex, as well as establishing autonomy from parents, 267

are different than the interpersonal demands placed on younger children. Given these differences, simple adaptations of measures created for children at other developmental stages are not appropriate. This reasoning led Inderbitzen and Foster (1992) to develop the Teenage Inventory of Social Skills (TISS). This self-report measure of social skills asks youth to rate the extent to which different behavioral descriptions apply to them. Items include "I ask other [kids] to go places with me" and "I laugh at other [kids] when they make mistakes."

The TISS, as well as other rating scales that are used with adolescents, such as the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach and Rescorla 2001), provide a detailed picture of the types of behaviors in which adolescents are engaging. As such, these assessments are a valuable source of information about adolescents' social skills. When these data are used to inform conclusions about social competence, however, two challenges emerge. First, in general, rating scales do not provide information about the social circumstances in which behaviors are embedded. Some individual items on a rating scale may include contextual information. For example, the TISS contains items such as "I tell classmates I'm sorry *when* I know I have hurt their feelings" and "I thank other [kids] *when* they have done something nice for me" (italics added). Such situational details, however, are generally lost when researchers sum up across items to form a total score (Wright et al. 2001). In doing so, researchers are treating situational variability as a source of error, rather than as potentially useful information. As a result of both the items included and the methods of scoring, then, behavioral rating scales do not account for the situation specificity of youth social behavior.

Second, this approach to measurement also does not allow for the possibility that the competence of the behaviors assessed may vary as a function of who is judging them. Rating scales assess the frequency with which youth engage in a predetermined set of behaviors. To draw conclusions about social competence from such data requires that judgments be made concerning the effectiveness of a particular action. For example, the conclusion that an adolescent who engages in aggressive behaviors frequently and assertive behaviors infrequently is not competent is predicated on the suppositions that aggressive actions are incompetent and assertive ones are effective. These blanket judgments can be problematic, as the effectiveness of these actions will vary as a function of who is evaluating the behavior. As described previously, aggressive behaviors are viewed as effective by some peers (Dirks et al. 2010). As such, deciding that youth who engage in these behaviors are not competent may be underestimating their social effectiveness with classmates.

Adding to the complexity is the reality that youth social behaviors are very nuanced, and seemingly minor differences may have a major effect on interpersonal success. For example, in a study of how early adolescents respond to provocation by a peer, Dirks et al. (2007b) found that a significant number of participants gave responses combining aggression and assertiveness. For example, many youth generated "hostilely assertive" responses, which combined verbal aggression and seeking an explanation (e.g., saying "What's your problem?" as opposed to the less aggressive "Why did you do that?"). Previous work has treated such responses as aggressive. In two other studies examining youth responses to a variety of peer-provocation scenarios, the researchers coded responses based on the most aggressive response present (Hughes et al. 2004; Peets et al. 2007). Within this framework, a response combining verbal aggression with an assertive response would be coded only as verbal aggression. Subsequent work has demonstrated that both peers and teachers are sensitive to the difference between a verbally aggressive response and a response that combines verbal aggression and assertiveness, with both groups viewing the latter type of response as significantly more effective (Dirks et al. 2010). Thus, treating such behaviors as aggressive may underestimate youth social competence. Such findings highlight the importance of obtaining judgments of the competence of youth behavior from the relevant people in their social environment.

To summarize briefly, four sources of variability have been implicated in youth social functioning: individual, behavior, situation, and judge. For the most part, measures focus on individual- and behavior-level factors. Failing to capture situation- and judge-level characteristics, however, may result in a picture of youth social functioning that is at best incomplete, and at worst, misleading. Social competence is inherently an evaluation, and as such it is influenced by the conditions under which behaviors are enacted, as well as who is judging those behaviors. By not attending to

364 these contextual and evaluative issues, researchers may
365 be over- or underestimating youth social competence,
366 as it is perceived by the people who are actually in
367 a position to reward or punish their behavior. Further-
368 more, omission of situation- and judge-level factors
369 may lead to misspecification of variability. For exam-
370 ple, youth in lower-income environments are more
371 likely to be targeted aggressively by peers (Dhami
372 et al. 2005), a type of situation that will often press
373 for aggressive responding (Dirks et al. 2007b). In the
374 absence of contextual information, one might conclude
375 that the problem is with the children, when in reality,
376 the issue is that they must manage a greater number of
377 problematic situations.

378 Recognizing that social competence is
379 a multivariate evaluation influenced by characteristics
380 of individuals, their behavior, and their social context,
381 how best can researchers manage this complexity so
382 that they may gain insight into the social successes and
383 struggles of adolescents? Several investigators have
384 suggested that social competence can be best under-
385 stood with respect to key social situations or tasks (see
386 McFall 1982; Rose and Asher 1999). Situation- or task-
387 specific measurement provides at least two noteworthy
388 advantages. If behaviors change as a function of situa-
389 tion, then the most useful and relevant information
390 about social performance will be obtained by determin-
391 ing how youth respond in critical interpersonal con-
392 texts. In addition, this approach provides detailed
393 information about when and how youth experience
394 social difficulties. These data provide clinicians with
395 clear targets for intervention.

396 If behavior is assessed with respect to key situations,
397 it is important that we choose the right interpersonal
398 contexts. Youth will confront an infinite number of
399 social scenarios, but most will not yield interesting
400 information about their social functioning. Goldfried
401 and D'Zurilla (1969) posited that the most important
402 situations are those that are commonly occurring, dif-
403 ficult to manage, and critical (i.e., performing inade-
404 quately will have negative consequences). Several
405 research teams have set out to identify such situations
406 in populations of adolescents. In general, all of these
407 investigations have used the behavioral analytic
408 approach (Goldfried and D'Zurrilla 1969). Working
409 within this framework, investigators create an inven-
410 tory of problematic situations by asking members of
411 the population of interest to generate relevant

412 scenarios. Freedman et al. (1978) and Gaffney and
413 McFall (1981) developed what were perhaps the first
414 taxonomies of problematic situations for adolescent
415 boys (Adolescent Problems Inventory, API) and girls
416 (Problem Inventory for Adolescent Girls, PIAG),
417 respectively. Adolescents, as well as individuals who
418 frequently interact with youth (e.g., parents, teachers)
419 were asked to identify problematic situations that are
420 relevant in the lives of teenagers. Situations not deemed
421 by participants to be commonly occurring and difficult
422 were not included in the final inventory. The final
423 taxonomy covered a variety of social contexts, such as
424 school (e.g., "A gym teacher picks on you, makes you
425 do extra push ups"), family relationships (e.g., "Your
426 father gets upset when you ask to borrow the car"), and
427 academics (e.g., "You feel hopelessly lost in a geometry
428 class").

429 Employing methods similar to those utilized to
430 create the API and PIAG, Cavell and Kelley (1992,
431 1994) developed the Checklist of Adolescent Problem
432 Situations (CAPS) and the Measure of Adolescent
433 Social Performance (MASP). On each measure, the
434 final set of items included situations representing
435 a number of different facets of adolescent life, including
436 relationships with peers (e.g., "Friend ignores you,"
437 "You were friendly to someone and now they won't
438 go away"), siblings ("Sibling borrows something of
439 yours without asking," "Sibling enjoys teasing you
440 and making you mad,"), and parents ("Parents refuse
441 to discuss a decision they say is final," "Parents are too
442 busy to take you where you want to go.") The types of
443 situations most relevant to adolescents change over
444 time, as does researchers' awareness of the kinds of
445 problematic circumstances that arise in adolescents'
446 social lives. For these reasons, the CAPS and the
447 MASP capture a number of situations not included in
448 the earlier measures. For example, the CAPS contains
449 several items involving relational aggression. Given the
450 rapid changes that occur in the societal contexts in
451 which adolescent development is embedded, it is
452 important to update situation inventories regularly.
453 For example, the widespread availability of personal
454 computers and the internet has created a new set of
455 challenging interpersonal contexts for adolescents (e.g.,
456 cyber-bullying; Ybarra and Mitchell 2004).

457 One domain not covered in detail by the CAPS and
458 the MASP is relationships with opposite sex peers.
459 Adolescence is marked by a steady transition from the

almost exclusively same-sex peer groups of childhood to social networks comprised increasingly of both males and females (Grover et al. 2007). Relationships with members of the opposite sex will present adolescents with new and challenging interactions to manage, such as responding to conflict with a romantic partner and sexual harassment (Grover and Nangle 2003; Wolfe et al. 2001). Such situations were identified in the Measure of Adolescent Heterosocial Competence (MAHC; Grover et al. 2005). The researchers asked 150 adolescents to generate as many "difficult" situations with the opposite sex as they could. The final measure contained 40 situations. A number of different themes were reflected, including dating situations (e.g., asking for a date; turning a date down), initiating a friendship/relationship (e.g., calling someone that you like), and situations involving drugs and alcohol (e.g., physical contact with another person when drinking).

Although these types of situations, as well as those included in the CAPS and the MASP, are relevant for many adolescents, it is important to note that the types of problematic situations adolescents must manage will vary as a function of environmental features. A notable example of this is adolescents living in economically disadvantaged circumstances. These youth may be confronted with a number of situations – such as witnessing violence, being approached by drug dealers, or being asked to join a gang – that might not occur as frequently in more advantaged environments. When there are theoretical reasons to expect that the situations identified as commonly occurring, difficult to manage, and critical may be different for a particular group, it will be necessary to generate a new taxonomy of situations. For this reason, Farrell et al. (1998, 2006) have conducted studies aimed at identifying important situations in the lives of lower-income adolescents. These researchers conducted focus groups with lower-income, urban sixth graders to create the Interpersonal Problem Situation Inventory for Urban Adolescents (IPSIUA; Farrell et al. 1998). Participants in this study did identify situations not brought up in other investigations. For example, conflicts with teachers included having a teacher falsely accuse them or tell lies about them. These urban adolescents also described challenges associated with living with a single parent and concerns about other students bringing weapons to school. Farrell et al. (2006) conducted a similar study with economically disadvantaged seventh and eighth graders, as well as their parents and school personnel. This investigation again highlighted the unique challenges associated with living in urban poverty, and the importance of developing contextually appropriate situation taxonomies.

Situation-based inventories have been used to assess social competence in two ways. It has been suggested that simply knowing how frequently adolescents experience these situations and how difficult they find them to be will predict their social adjustment (e.g., Cavell and Kelley 1994). Adolescents who respond ineffectively to interpersonal situations are more likely to generate new social problems, and as such, will experience challenging situations at a higher rate than their more socially effective peers (see Rudolph et al. 2000). The IPSIUA assesses the frequency with which adolescents experience difficult interpersonal situations, and the CAPS measures both frequency and adolescents' perceptions of the difficulty of social situations. Both of these measures show significant associations with other indices of social functioning, as well as psychopathology. For example, on the IPSIUA, higher frequency ratings were associated positively with anxiety, violent behavior, and drug use (Farrell et al. 1998). On the CAPS, adolescents who were unpopular (as assessed with sociometric procedures and teacher nominations) perceived situations associated with school and making friends to be more difficult and frequently occurring than did their more popular peers (Cavell and Kelley 1994).

Of course, the most detailed picture of adolescent social functioning will emerge if researchers determine not only how often youth experience situations, and how difficult they perceive these encounters to be, but also how they respond when these challenges befall them, and whether or not these responses are viewed to be effective by relevant judges. Within the behavioral-analytic framework, after situations are identified, members of the population of interest are asked to generate responses to the situations, usually by reporting what they would "say or do" if the situation happened to them. Following this, relevant judges evaluate the competence of different responses. Thus, the final measure allows researchers to assess how youth respond to specific interpersonal challenges, as well as the perceived competence of their chosen social strategies.

556 The developers of the API, PIAG, MASP, and
557 MAHC all took these steps. For the most part, the
558 researchers relied upon adult "experts" (e.g., psychol-
559 ogists, parents, and teachers) to evaluate the compe-
560 tence of responses. In addition, these measures
561 emphasized agreement among judges when developing
562 items. For example, Freedman et al. (1978) discarded
563 items for which there was significant disagreement
564 among judges regarding the competence of responses.
565 In general, then, researchers have focused on one group
566 of judges, and within this group, treated differences
567 between raters as error.

568 Recent data suggest, however, that these inter-judge
569 differences in evaluations of competence reflect, at least
570 in part, valuable signal, rather than being attributable
571 entirely to measurement-related noise. As described
572 previously, different groups in youth's lives may have
573 differing opinions about the competence of a given
574 action (Dirks et al. 2010); as such, adolescents' per-
575 ceived competence will vary systematically depending
576 upon who is providing the ratings. Interestingly,
577 Gaffney and McFall (1981) obtained ratings of effec-
578 tiveness from both adults and teenage girls during the
579 development of the PIAG. The results indicated that
580 ratings of effectiveness provided by the adolescents,
581 which reflect social competence as perceived by peers,
582 did not discriminate between delinquent and
583 nondelinquent girls. In other words, delinquent girls
584 were not viewed by their age mates to be less competent
585 than their nondelinquent peers. From an intervention
586 perspective, knowing that adolescent girls with behav-
587 ior problems struggle more from the perspective of
588 adults than youth is critical. If peers do not perceive
589 behaviors as problematic, or if they identify them as
590 competent, it may be difficult to get youth to stop
591 engaging in these actions, even if they are causing
592 problems with adults.

593 For this reason, when developing situation-based
594 measures of social competence, it will be useful to
595 identify who the key judges for each situation are, and
596 to maintain their unique perspectives when determin-
597 ing the competence of responses. In doing so, it will be
598 important to base the selection of judges on theoretical
599 grounds. Different judges will be relevant for different
600 situations (e.g., Cavell and Kelley 1992); for example,
601 for situations occurring at school, both peers and
602 teachers are likely in a position to consequate youth
603 behavior. It will also be important to utilize both

604 theoretical and empirical criteria when deciding
605 whether to combine judges' ratings. It seems plausible,
606 theoretically, that teachers would form a homogeneous
607 group: they have similar professional experiences and
608 encounter youth in similar circumstances. Empirical
609 data point to a similar conclusion: teacher ratings of
610 competence show very little variability (Dirks et al.
611 2010). The evaluations of peers are more disparate,
612 and similar variability is likely to be evident in parent
613 evaluations as well.

614 When such discrepancies are present among a class
615 of judges, it may be necessary to break the groups down
616 further along theoretically meaningful dimensions. For
617 example, many researchers have noted that societal
618 norms will influence perceptions of competence (see
619 Chen and French 2008), suggesting the importance of
620 considering cultural factors when identifying judges.
621 Relatedly, previous work has also suggested that socio-
622 economic factors may be associated with both youth
623 and parent perceptions of competence (e.g., Dodge
624 et al. 1994; Luthar and McMahon 1996). Youth and
625 parents in an urban, economically disadvantaged envi-
626 ronment are likely to have very different perceptions of
627 behavioral effectiveness than those living in a more
628 affluent suburban neighborhood. In the case of par-
629 ents, it may be useful to design a complementary mea-
630 sure that asks parents to evaluate the competence of
631 responses given by their child. For youth, it is the
632 judgments of their own parents (not parents, on aver-
633 age) that are most likely to influence their behavior.
634 Given that it is often possible to obtain data from
635 parents when conducting assessments with youth, it
636 may be feasible to determine youth's competence
637 from the perspective of their own parents.

Conclusion 638

639 By developing measures that allow competence to vary
640 as a function of the situations in which youth are
641 acting, as well as who is evaluating their behaviors,
642 researchers will be bringing their assessment strategies
643 in line with their current theoretical understanding of
644 social competence, which emphasizes that competence
645 is an evaluative construct influenced by both situation-
646 and judge-level factors. The recognition that evalua-
647 tions of competence depend, at least in part, on
648 characteristics of both situations and judges, is likely
649 to pay important dividends for educators and clini-
650 cians trying to help youth experiencing social

difficulties. For example, it may be important for interventionists to help youth develop strategies that will allow them to manage key social situations effectively (or, at least, in ways not perceived as grossly ineffective) from the perspective of the different groups in their social environment. When negotiating their social worlds, adolescents must consistently solve challenging multi-constraint problems: They must generate solutions to very difficult social circumstances when the key people in their lives will often not agree about the efficacy of their solutions. To the extent that measures of social competence, and ultimately, interventions targeting social competence, capture and address these complexities, researchers and clinicians will be in the best position to help adolescents succeed socially.

Cross-References

▶ Measurement

▶ Peer Relationships

▶ Social Competence

▶ Social Skills

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