



Assessing romantic competence in adolescence: The Romantic Competence Interview

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Abstract

This article presents preliminary psychometric data on the reliability and validity of the newly developed Romantic Competence Interview (RCI). The RCI is an interviewer-assessed measure designed to assess competence among adolescents regardless of romantic relationship status. Eighty-three early adolescent girls (*m* age = 13.45 years) recruited from local school districts were administered the RCI along with other measures of social competence, and peer and romantic functioning. Concurrent and 1-year predictive associations were examined. Results indicated that the RCI was reliably coded and demonstrated good construct validity. Implications for the conceptualization and measurement of romantic competence are discussed, as is the importance of attending to issues of competence early in adolescence.

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Introduction

The past decade has seen rapid growth in interest in adolescent romantic relationships and functioning. Progress has been made in charting normative developmental processes in romantic relationship development (e.g., Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994; Shulman & Scharf, 2000), describing key features of romantic relationships (e.g., Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006), and identifying predictors, correlates, and consequences of adolescent romantic relationships (see Crouter & Booth, 2006; Florsheim, 2003). This has helped solidify the importance of studying adolescent romance, which heretofore had been largely ignored (see Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999; Collins, 2003).

Despite progress, what is known still is limited. One constraint in the literature is the focus on adolescent relationships themselves. Much research has examined actual dyadic relationships. This is not surprising. Indeed, it is appropriate and important, but it has limits. For example, stage theories of romantic development indicate that early adolescence is characterized by romantic interactions, such as group dating and companionships (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). As such, many early adolescents do not yet have romantic relationships, or, if they do, those relationships may not “look like” what we typically think of as dyadic relationships.¹ This is important because if we focus exclusively on dyadic relationships, it means we cannot study adolescent romance until adolescents are in actual relationships, thereby ruling out examination of pre-existing skills or deficits in romantic functioning that may bear on how relationships eventually develop and progress. We suggest that a fuller understanding of adolescent romance will involve identifying skills that adolescents must have to function well in romantic relationships, and we think this may be particularly important to do for adolescents at an early age, regardless of relationship status.

We conceive of such skills within the construct of romantic competence. Those who study peer relationships focus not only on features of relationships, but on skills or competencies that allow young people to function well in the social domain. Indeed, social competence is related to key features of peer relationships and predicts important outcomes, including interpersonal stress and depressive symptoms (e.g., Cole, Martin, & Powers, 1997; Herzberg et al., 1998). This speaks to the potential value in studying romantic competence in adolescence.

Unfortunately, although sound interpersonal competence measures exist (e.g., Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988; Harter, 1988), none focus specifically or comprehensively on romantic functioning (e.g., the romantic domain of Harter’s Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents includes only five items and measures perceived romantic appeal). Others that include aspects of romantic functioning (e.g., Buhrmester et al., 1988; Grover, Nangle, & Zeff, 2005) are couched in opposite-sex, or heterosocial relationships, which may not capture the experience of all adolescents. Moreover, most social competence measures are self-report questionnaires, which increase the likelihood of biased reporting and/or shared method variance problems when outcome measures or correlates are also self-report. As such, existing social competence measures offer only limited guidance for the assessment of romantic competence.

¹Although defining what adolescent romantic relationships are is a problem that plagues the field (e.g., Furman & Hand, 2006).

Therefore, we have developed an interview designed to assess romantic competence, the Romantic Competence Interview (RCI). In this paper, we describe our conceptualization of romantic competence and the RCI, and present preliminary psychometric data to support its reliability and validity. We note that we present only one possible way of conceptualizing and measuring romantic competence. There are certainly other ways, and we offer ours not as a defining or ideal one, but rather as an example of how to think about and measure skills and deficits related to romantic functioning. It is our aim to spur further conceptual development and empirical research into what we believe to be an important aspect of adolescent romance.

Our conceptualization of romantic competence was intended to be broad. In line with others interested in adolescent romantic views (e.g., [Furman & Wehner, 1994](#)), our goal was to capture the ways young people think and feel about, approach (or avoid) relationships, and perceive their behavior in relationships. [Rose-Krasnor \(1997\)](#) makes clear there are advantages and disadvantages of both narrow and broad approaches to defining competence, with neither emerging as superior. Indeed, she argues that focusing on single behaviors can be inappropriate; that any single index reflects only a portion of the whole range of competence. She defines social competence broadly as effectiveness, includes a focus on both self and others in interaction, and highlights goals and skills in context. Our conceptualization paralleled this approach. In doing so, we based our notion of competence on social-cognitive models of interpersonal problem solving, attachment theory, and models of emotion-regulation, each of which has been identified as being relevant to social competence ([Rose-Krasnor, 1997](#)).² Each model has unique features, but also commonalities with regard to effectiveness in interpersonal functioning. Our definition reflects these commonalities. Although a thorough review of each model is beyond the scope of this paper, below we briefly describe the key features that guided our thinking.

Social-cognitive models of interpersonal problem solving highlight the capacity for awareness of the importance of mutuality in social interaction (e.g., [Brion-Meisels & Selman, 1984](#); [Schultz, Yeates, & Selman, 1989](#); [Selman & Demorest, 1984](#); [Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976](#); [Yeates, Schultz, & Selman, 1990](#)). In this model, adaptive interpersonal problem solving involves the ability to think through interpersonal situations in a coherent, solution-oriented way that recognizes consequences and focuses on and respects the needs and outcomes of both people involved. Such problem solving ability is associated with adaptive functioning in adolescents (e.g., [Beardslee, Schultz, & Selman, 1987](#); [Davila, Hammen, Burge, Paley, & Daley, 1995](#)).

Attachment theory ([Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988](#)) has numerous implications for romantic competence, and we drew on three. First, evidence suggests that coherence in state of mind about relationships, as evidenced by insight, the ability to reflect on the self and others, and the ability to learn from prior experience, is adaptive (e.g., [Treboux, Crowell, & Waters, 2004](#)). Second, the capacity to balance intimacy and autonomy is adaptive. People who are focused excessively on either intimacy needs (e.g., those with a preoccupied style) or autonomy needs (e.g., those with a dismissing style) tend to have poorer romantic functioning (for a review, see [Cassidy & Shaver, 1999](#)). Third, attachment theory suggests that the capacity to regulate distress and maintain self-worth and trust in others, in the face of threats to security, is adaptive (see [Cassidy, 1994](#); [Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003](#)).

²It is important to note that our definition is likely related to a number of other theories, but these are the main ones from which we drew.

Theories of emotion-regulation also emphasize the adaptive nature of the ability to regulate distress and maintain a coherent and positive sense of self. In general, adaptive emotion-regulation involves the ability to flexibly experience and express a range of emotions and to modulate that experience and expression in contextually appropriate ways (see Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994; Salovey, Hsee, & Mayer, 1993). Poor emotion-regulation is indicated by, for example, extremes of emotional experience or expression (excessive or restricted), emotions that are inappropriate to the circumstances, and/or a lack of emotional attunement (to self or others).

Drawing on these models and their commonalities, we construed of romantic competence as the ability to think about relationships with a consideration of mutuality, in a thoughtful, insightful way, that shows learning from experience, and ability for consequential thinking; the ability to make decisions and engage in behaviors that maintain care and respect of self and others and that can be successfully dealt with emotionally; and the ability to regulate emotions and the self in response to relationship experiences (e.g., to tolerate non-desired outcomes, to inhibit rumination, to maintain self-esteem, to balance individuality and closeness), all aspects of functioning that have been construed as being components of competence (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

To assess competence defined in this manner, we developed the RCI. In doing so, we attempted to capture aspects of five features of adolescent romance identified by Collins (2003): involvement, partner selection, content, quality, and cognitive and emotional processes. Therefore, we interviewed adolescents with regard to thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in actual and hypothetical romantic circumstances, as well as concerning ideas about and approaches to romantic relationships and experiences. This information was coded by the interviewers on a global scale of competence (described in the Method section).

We expected RCI scores to demonstrate concurrent convergent and discriminant validity. First, we expected the RCI to correlate positively, but only weakly, with general measures of social competence, as evidence of its distinctness. Second, as evidence of its specificity, we expected the RCI to correlate significantly (and positively) with reports of romantic relationship security, but to be unrelated or only weakly related to reports of peer relationship security.

We also expected the RCI to demonstrate criterion validity (concurrent and predictive). First, we expected RCI scores to correlate with adolescents' perceptions of marriage, including perceptions of parents' marital satisfaction and expectations about the likelihood that they will marry someday.³ Similarly, in a more stringent test, we expected the RCI to correlate with parents' reports of marital/relationship satisfaction and with parental marital status. We also expected these correlations to be unique to the RCI, such that associations would not emerge with other measures of social competence. Given evidence for intergenerational transmission of interpersonal dysfunction, particularly marital problems and divorce (e.g., Amato, 1996; Feng, Giarusso, Bengston, & Frye, 1999; McLeod, 1991), social-learning processes may be at play, such that adolescents without a successful model for romantic relationships may develop maladaptive attitudes and fail to learn skills required for competence in their own romantic lives (e.g., Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Story, Karney, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2004). Thus, adolescents who view their parents' marriage as unhappy, who have parents who report being less satisfied, and who come from non-intact families (e.g., separated, divorced, never married) should demonstrate less

³Because this may not be an entirely valid criterion for non-heterosexual adolescents, we conducted these analyses controlling for self-reported same-sex physical attraction and they yielded the same findings.

romantic competence. Similarly, in line with the notion that early relational experiences are internalized and provide a foundation for schemas that guide interpersonal behavior (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; see Messer & Warren, 1995), higher levels of romantic competence should predict more positive expectations for marriage.

Second, we expected RCI scores to correlate with reports of relevant behavior. There are a variety of potentially relevant behaviors, ranging from very theory-specific (e.g., with regard to mutuality, emotion-regulation, etc.) to very broad. As a strong test, we chose to focus on broader behaviors, particularly ones that could be considered risky for early adolescents, namely, sexual activity. Although sexual activity is a normative adolescent behavior and may have adaptive qualities, early sexual activity, particularly intercourse, is frequently associated with poorer psychosocial functioning (e.g., Bingham & Crockett, 1996; see Welsh, Grello, & Harper, 2003), and can put youth at risk for sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancy. Healthy sexual decision-making is, thus, an important skill for early adolescents. Adolescent sexual activity typically occurs in the context of romantic experiences or relationships (see Furman & Shaffer, 2003), suggesting it might be associated with romantic competence. Therefore, we predicted that lower RCI scores would be associated with reports of greater sexual activity.

Also relevant to construct validity is the role of age and experience in the development of romantic competence. The skills that define competence must be considered in context. That is, they may mean something different and/or manifest in different ways across developmental phases. Although not a hypothesis that could be tested in this sample, as we focused only on early adolescents, it is an issue we took into account in our coding system, as discussed in the method section. In addition, the constructs we rely on in our definition (e.g., social-cognitive capacity, emotion-regulation) develop with age, and romantic experience also should provide opportunities for learning and growth. To explore these issues we examined associations between romantic competence and age (although with a restricted range), pubertal status, and amount of romantic experience. We also examined whether correlations between RCI scores and the other variables differed for girls with versus without relationship experience. From a developmental perspective, romantic competence might be more salient, meaningful, impactful, or affected in girls' lives when they have or have had actual romantic experiences.

Method

Participants

Participants were 83 early adolescent girls who participated with their primary caregiver (mothers = 80; fathers = 3) in a larger project on relationships and psychological functioning. The Stony Brook University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects approved the research. The larger study was designed to examine only girls because they are at greater risk for depression and anxiety (a primary focus of the larger study) in adolescence and more attuned to and affected by relationships than are boys (Compton, Nelson, & March, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Thus, as elaborated further in the discussion, the extent to which our definition of romantic competence generalizes to adolescent males is unknown.

Families were recruited from participants in a larger questionnaire study. Questionnaire study participants were from three school districts in Suffolk County, New York, representing a range of demographics. Parents of all female questionnaire study participants ($n = 173$) were contacted about the current study, and 64 participated. To recruit additional participants, an informational flyer was included with a monthly newsletter in one district, resulting in 19 additional families.⁴ Girls' average age was 13.45 (S.D. = .68) and 45% were in 8th grade. Of those reporting ethnicity, 89% reported Caucasian, but this varied by school district (100% in one, 95% in another, 61% in the third) in a manner that matched district ethnicity data (2006 reports indicated 96%, 91%, and 64%, respectively). Parent-reported median family income was in the range of \$53,000–\$127,000, consistent with median household incomes in the school districts (Public School Review, n.d.). Thus, our sample is representative of ethnicity and income for the three school districts. Although the income data may suggest moderate to high SES, this should be taken in the context of a wide range of parental education, with many parents (42%) reporting only a high school education. Eighty-eight percent ($n = 71$) of the sample participated again 1 year later. Participants and non-participants did not differ on RCI scores ($t = .70, p = .48$).

Procedures

Each girl and her parent attended two 3-h lab sessions (T1) at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. During the first, girls and parents provided consent, assent and demographics, parents provided marital satisfaction data, and girls were interviewed privately about romantic competence. In the second, girls privately completed questionnaires on romantic and peer functioning, perceptions of marriage, and pubertal status. Girls and parents each received \$35 for the first session and \$40 for the second. One year later (T2), girls and parents provided questionnaire data via mail and/or through a secure website, and were each paid \$75.

Measures

Romantic competence

The RCI was used, at T1, to assess romantic competence, regardless of romantic relationship status. As noted, several criteria are assessed which factor into global competence ratings: the ability to think about relationships with a consideration of mutuality, in a thoughtful, insightful way, that shows learning from experience, and ability for consequential thinking; the ability to make decisions and engage in behaviors that maintain care and respect of self and others and that can be successfully dealt with emotionally; and the ability to regulate emotions and the self in response to relationship experiences. A global competence score was assigned on a five-point scale (5 = *significant level of competence*, 1 = *no evidence of competence*), with 0.5-point scores allowed. Because the field is at the beginning stages of defining and understanding romantic competence, a

⁴There were no significant differences between girls recruited from the questionnaire study and from the flyer on age ($t = -.13, p = .89$), parental income ($t = .61, p = .55$), or ethnicity ($X^2 = .44, p = .51$). Girls in the questionnaire study who chose to participate in this study were compared to those who did not on age and ethnicity, as these were the only variables relevant to this study that overlapped in the two groups. The groups did not differ on age ($t = 1.34, p = .18$). However, there was a significant association between groups and ethnicity ($X^2 = 6.83, p = .01$), such that a higher proportion of Caucasian girls participated in the study.

more global approach seemed reasonable and warranted. In line with this, our theory of romantic competence and the role it plays in the lives of young women is a theory about overall competence, not about how specific aspects of competence might uniquely affect and be affected by girls' experiences (e.g., family relations, peer relations, mental health, etc.). As such, we had no hypotheses about specific areas of competence, rendering global coding an appropriate choice.

The RCI is a semi-structured interview that includes questions that tap the criteria noted above. Adolescents are told they will be asked about romantic and dating experiences, and interviewers are trained to assess and use the adolescents' language/terminology to maintain ecological validity. Adolescents are then asked about dating status and history, followed by the types of friends they have to begin in a non-threatening manner and to understand their romantic activities in the context of their larger peer group. This is followed by a series of questions regarding what they think makes a good or bad relationship, qualities they prefer in a partner, and what they do when romantically interested in someone. A series of hypothetical scenarios are then presented in which adolescents are asked to talk about what they might do and how they might think or feel if the situation happened to them. Scenarios were designed to capture normative experiences (i.e., being romantically interested in someone, wanting to tell someone you are dating that you like them), potential betrayal situations (i.e., the person you are dating flirts with someone or cheats on you), and potential rejection situations (i.e., the person you were dating breaks up with you). In addition, adolescents were asked questions that assessed decision-making processes (i.e., when you are dating someone, how do you decide how far to go with them), learning source (i.e., how much do you talk to your parents/friends about romantic relationships and what have you learned from talking with them), and the importance of being in a romantic relationship (i.e., how important is it to have a romantic relationship; how much do you worry about not finding someone to be with). Finally, adolescents who reported a current or past relationship were questioned about communication and support, love-worthiness and trust, conflict resolution, the physical relationship, mutuality, and issues surrounding the break-up (if applicable). Adolescents who reported having never been in a relationship were questioned about relevant thoughts and feelings (e.g., have you ever wanted to go out with someone; do you ever feel lonely; do you ever feel pressure to be in relationship?). These questions were adapted from commonly used interviews that provide assessments of romantic functioning (e.g., [Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991](#); [Hammen et al., 1987](#)).

Length of interviews ranged from 20 to 40 min, depending on relationship experience (e.g., interviews for girls currently in a relationship were longer because of more to discuss). Interviews were audio taped for reliability purposes, but interviewers coded interview material immediately. Interviews followed administration of Bartholomew's Family Attachment Interview ([Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991](#)), which assessed experiences in the parent–adolescent relationship only (and was not coded by the interviewer). Interviewers had no knowledge of any other information about the participant.

When coding, information from all questions is considered, although not all will yield relevant information for every adolescent. Questions were not designed to map precisely onto the theory and criteria. Rather, questions were designed to elicit information likely to be relevant to the theory and criteria. This is similar to attachment interviews (e.g., the AAI; Bartholomew's interviews; [Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991](#); [George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985](#)). Questions likely to elicit relevant information are asked, but tend to be somewhat indirect. In some cases, relevant

information is provided, but in others, non-diagnostic information results. Although we recognize this poses a challenge for people trying to learn the interview and coding system, we believe romantic competence, especially among young people, may not be best assessed in a completely direct or obvious manner. In fact, that is in part why we developed the interview. We view the RCI as analogous to a semi-structured clinical interview, where interviewers follow an interview, but probe as needed to elicit relevant, elaborated information, which is then used to formulate a coherent clinical impression. Therefore, responses indicative of competence, or the lack thereof, are noted and weighed in the global rating.

We believe our approach also is useful in that different questions and responses can be used to judge competence based on the unique experiences of the adolescents. For instance, one may wonder how competence could be assessed similarly among girls who have and have not been in romantic relationships. First, girls make decisions about and engage in behaviors that are romantically relevant even if not in the context of a dyadic relationship (e.g., whether to approach someone they like, how to do so, whether to go on a date or ask someone out, whether to engage in sexual activities, who to flirt with, what message to send when flirting, etc.). Girls who have not been in a relationship can discuss such things and their responses can be coded. Second, information from the hypothetical scenario questions can be relied upon more heavily for girls without relationship experience. Granted, their answers may differ from actual behavior, but our rationale is that the way girls think about these things, even (or perhaps especially) before they engage in them, provides important information about their capacity for competence.

Efforts were made to code the RCI in the context of developmental level regarding what may be appropriate or normative in the romantic lives of early adolescents. Early adolescent romantic relationships are typically marked by affiliation and companionship, and romantic interactions typically occur in mixed-gender groups (Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Adolescents in the early stages of romantic development are beginning to explore sexual feelings, and romantic partners typically serve as companions or friends by providing experiences of cooperation and reciprocity (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Exclusive, longer-term dyadic dating, in which partners serve intimacy, support, and caretaking roles do not emerge until later. Such experiences were, therefore, not expected and adolescents were not penalized in scoring for failing to have them. For adolescents who did report more advanced experiences, they were judged on whether they handled them competently based on scoring criteria. As such, competence scores reflected the manner in which adolescents were handling their experiences, whatever those experiences were.

Peers play an important role in early adolescent romance (e.g., Brown, 1999). They are the context in which romantic experiences occur and can act as facilitators and communicators. For instance, many participants reported using friends to learn about and convey information about a romantic interest (e.g., whether a mutual interest exists). As such, RCI scores were made bearing in mind what appeared to be developmentally normative behaviors in our sample. We also paid attention to an issue we labeled “readiness,” the extent to which adolescents were not competent versus not psychologically or behaviorally attuned to or involved in issues of romance. As those who study early adolescents are aware, there can be a wide range of maturity level (physical and emotional) among 13 and 14 year olds. We did not want to penalize them for lack of readiness. So, again, we attempted to code their interviews based on the manner in which they were handling their experiences, whatever those experiences were, and for those with no experiences, scores were largely derived from responses to the hypothetical scenarios.

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the RCI and measures of social competence

	1	2	3	<i>M</i>	S.D.
1. ICQ—same sex				3.8	.55
2. ICQ—opposite sex	.82**			3.5	.60
3. MAHC	.49**	.40**		105.5	9.8
4. RCI	.24*	.20*	.23*	3.2	.71

Notes: *N* ranges from 75 to 83. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, one-tailed. All variables were assessed at T1. RCI: Romantic Competence Interview; ICQ: Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester et al., 1988); MAHC: Measure of Adolescent Heterosocial Competence (Grover et al., 2005).

The interview and coding scale are available from the first author. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation for RCI scores. In addition, scores ranged from 1.5 to 5 with the median and modal scores both being 3. Appendix provides examples of the types of responses to sample questions that would be indicative of competent and not competent responses.

Social competence

General social competence was assessed at T1 with the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ; Buhrmester et al., 1988), a commonly used 40-item self-report measure that captures perceived competence in same-sex friendships and opposite-sex romantic relationships or friendships (adolescents rate the latter as romantic relationships when they currently have an opposite-sex dating partner). The ICQ includes five dimensions: initiating relationships, self-disclosure, asserting displeasure, providing emotional support, and managing conflicts. Items are rated on a five-point scale ranging from (1) “I’m poor at this” to (5) “I’m extremely good at this.” Total scores for same-sex and opposite-sex relationships were used given our interest in validating the RCI in relation to general social competence, rather than specific aspects of it. The ICQ has good psychometric properties, and in the present study, internal consistency (alpha) was .93 for same-sex and .93 for opposite-sex competence.

The Measure of Adolescent Heterosocial Competence (MAHC; Grover et al., 2005) was also used to assess competence in opposite-sex relationships at T1. The MAHC is a 40-item multiple-choice questionnaire that presents heterosocial dilemmas (some related to dating situations, some related to non-dating situations) and asks adolescents what they would do in each. Choices vary in competence level. Higher scores indicate greater competence. The MAHC has adequate reliability and validity (Grover et al., 2005). In the present sample, alpha was .67.

Romantic and peer relationship security

Romantic security was assessed at T1 with the 18-item Revised Adult Attachment Scale (AAS-R; Collins & Read, 1990). Items were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 0 to 4. The AAS-R includes three subscales: close (the extent to which people feel comfortable being close to others), depend (the extent to which people are comfortable relying on others, and believe others are dependable), and anxiety (fears about abandonment and of being unloved). The AAS-R is widely used and has adequate psychometric properties (Collins & Read, 1990; see Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999). Although the bulk of this evidence comes from studies of adults, researchers have

successfully used similar measures with adolescents (e.g., Collins, Cooper, Albino & Allard, 2002; Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004; Steinberg, Davila, & Fincham, 2006). Internal consistency (alpha) in the present study was .73 for close, .74 for depend, and .84 for anxiety.

Peer relationship security was assessed at T1 with the 29-item peer subscale of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The IPPA is a commonly used self-report measure of adolescent security with three subscales: communication, trust, and alienation. Items are rated on a five-point scale ranging from (1) almost never true to (5) almost always true. The IPPA has good reliability and validity (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Alpha in the present study was .84 for communication, .84 for trust, and .69 for alienation.

Romantic and sexual behaviors

A self-report measure designed for a previous study was administered at T1 and T2 (see Steinberg et al., 2006). To assess sexual activity, adolescents rated the frequency (1 = never, 2 = once or twice, 3 = a few times, 4 = many times) with which they engaged in sexual intercourse with a date or romantic partner and other sexual relations with a date or romantic partner (more than kissing, but not intercourse). Frequency ratings for each item were used in analyses. To assess more age-normative romantic behaviors, adolescents rated the frequency (using the same scale as above) with which they engaged in the following: having been asked out on a date, having asked someone out on a date, having gone on a good date, having flirted with someone, having been romantically attracted to someone, and having kissed a date or romantic partner. Responses were summed for an overall measure of normative activity (alpha = .78). At T1, items were rated for whether they ever occurred. At T2, items were rated as since T1 to capture new experiences not overlapping with T1 or prior.

Romantic relationship experience

At T1, adolescents were asked whether they were currently in a romantic relationship and whether they had ever been in one. Twelve reported a current relationship (average length in weeks = 4.5 (S.D. = 4.6), range = 1–12), and an additional 44 reported a previous relationship (average length in weeks = 17.4 (S.D. = 23.4) range = 1–144). Because of the small numbers, these groups were collapsed ($n = 56$). Girls with and without relationship experience did not differ on ethnicity and parental income. At T2, girls reported current involvement (17 in a relationship, 54 not). Any relationship involvement between T1 and T2 (including current at T2) was also assessed, with 40 reporting involvement and 31 not.

Perceptions of marriage

Perceptions of parents' marital satisfaction was assessed with the question, "How happy is your parents' marriage?" which was rated on an eight-point scale ranging from very unhappy to very happy. Expectations for marriage was assessed with the question, "How likely is it that you will get married at some point in your life?" which was rated on a seven-point scale ranging from very unlikely to very likely. Both were assessed at T1 and T2.

Parental marital status and marital/relationship satisfaction

Parental marital status was assessed at T1, with 68 marriages intact and 15 non-intact (2 separated, 11 divorced, 2 never married). Marital/relationship satisfaction was assessed at T1 and T2 with the Quality Marriage Inventory (QMI; Norton, 1983) a six-item commonly used global self-report measure. Items are rated on continuous scales where higher scores reflect greater satisfaction. Alpha in the present study was .96. At T1, 79 parents were married or in a relationship and provided data.

Pubertal status

Self-reported pubertal status was assessed at T1 using the Pubertal Development Scale (PDS; Petersen, Crockett, Richards, & Boxer, 1988), a five-item inventory that assesses growth spurt in height, skin changes, body hair changes, breast development, and age at menarche. Items are rated on a four-point scale (1 = no development; 2 = development has barely started; 3 = development is definitely underway; 4 = development seems completed) except for menarche which is rated dichotomously (1 = has not begun; 4 = has begun). The PDS has good reliability (Petersen et al., 1988) and validity (Brooks-Gunn, Warren, Rosso, & Gargiulo, 1987). Present alpha was .57.⁵ Both the five-item scale and the menarche scale were analyzed.

Results

Interrater reliability

Sixteen of the RCIs (19%) were coded by a second coder. Reliability analyses revealed an intraclass correlation (random, absolute method) of .61, and an alpha of .80. There were 31% (5/16) exact agreement, 63% (10/16) agreement within 0.5-point, and 94% (15/16) agreement within 1-point. The most unreliable set of codes evidenced a 1.5-point difference. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus ratings were used in the analyses.

Convergent and discriminant validity

Our first prediction was that the RCI would correlate significantly and positively, but only weakly, with general measures of social competence. As Table 1 shows, this was supported. The RCI was associated with the other measures in the range of .20–.24 indicating it taps a related, but distinct construct. In further support, compared to the RCI, the MAHC had a significantly stronger correlation with ICQ—same sex ($p < .03$, one-tailed) and a marginally stronger correlation with ICQ—opposite sex ($p < .07$, one-tailed) using Meng, Rosenthal, and Rubin's (1992) method for comparing correlated correlations. Perhaps this was due to shared method variance and/or shared conceptual features. The ICQ subscales were correlated.

⁵In Petersen's original article (Petersen et al., 1988), alpha coefficients ranged from .68 to .83 (mean = .77). In other studies, alpha coefficients varied. Some reported above .70 (Ge, Cogner, & Elder, 2001; Ge et al., 2003), but others reported lower. For instance, Dick, Rose, Pulkkinen, and Kaprio (2001) reported alpha for girls at age 12 of .67 and at age 14 of .56. Alpha in this study is consistent with these lower alphas at younger ages. Still, results should be interpreted cautiously.

Our second prediction was that the RCI would correlate with reports of romantic relationship security, but would be unrelated to reports of peer relationship security. As Table 2 shows, this also was supported. The RCI was not significantly associated with peer security. In fact, two of the three correlations were nearly zero. However, the RCI was associated with all aspects of romantic security in expected directions. To determine whether these correlations were significantly different, we computed the average correlation between (1) the RCI and the IPPA subscales, (2) the RCI and the AAS-R subscales, and (3) the IPPA subscales and the AAS-R subscales. Then, using the Meng et al. (1992) approach, we found that the average correlation between the RCI and AAS-R subscales was significantly greater than the average correlation between the RCI and the IPPA subscales ($p = .04$, one-tailed). These data support the specificity of the RCI to romantic functioning. The ICQ and MAHC were correlated with both peer and romantic security, consistent with their emphasis on more general features of social competence.

Criterion validity

We expected RCI scores to correlate with adolescents' and parents' perceptions of marriage and marital status, and we expected these correlations to be unique to the RCI. As Table 3 shows, there was support for this hypothesis. Correlations between the RCI and both adolescents' perceptions and parental reports of parents' marital satisfaction were significant at T1 and T2, and the correlation between the RCI and expectations for marriage was significant at T2 (and marginally at T1), all in expected directions. Importantly, the correlations with ICQ and MAHC were mainly weak and non-significant (and sometimes in opposite directions), although more consistent for T2 parent-reported marital satisfaction. The differences between the RCI's correlation with adolescents' perceptions of parents' marriage and each of the other variables' correlations with such perceptions were all significantly different ($ps < .02$, one-tailed) at T1, but not at T2 (although they neared significance). The differences between the RCI's correlation with parental reports of marital satisfaction and each of the other variables' correlations with such expectations did not reach significance. The same was true for expectations for marriage, except in the case of the MAHC at T2. Furthermore, girls from non-intact families had lower RCI scores

Table 2
Correlations between the competence measures and peer and romantic security

	ICQ—same sex	ICQ—opposite sex	MAHC	RCI	<i>M</i>	S.D.
IPPA Peer—Trust	.41**	.32**	.26**	.05	4.15	.55
IPPA Peer—Communication	.41**	.37**	.25**	.06	4.12	.67
IPPA Peer—Alienation	-.49**	-.24**	-.35**	-.13	1.96	.66
AAS-R—Close	.51**	.45**	.23*	.24*	3.68	.77
AAS-R—Depend	.40**	.33**	.24*	.31**	3.73	.78
AAS-R—Anxiety	-.32**	-.24*	-.22*	-.19*	2.53	.92

Notes: *N* ranges from 75 to 83. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, one-tailed. All variables were assessed at T1. RCI: Romantic Competence Interview; ICQ: Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester et al., 1988); MAHC: Measure of Adolescent Heterosocial Competence (Grover et al., 2005). IPPA: Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987); AAS-R: Adult Attachment Scale—romantic version (Collins & Read, 1990).

Table 3
Correlations between the competence measures and criterion and age/experience related variables

	ICQ— same sex	ICQ— opposite sex	MAHC	RCI	<i>M</i>	S.D.
T1 Marital satisfaction (adolescent)	-.05	-.03	-.04	.34**	5.64	1.88
T2 Marital satisfaction (adolescent)	-.02	-.01	-.04	.23*	5.00	2.13
T1 Marital/relationship satisfaction (parent)	.10	.17 ⁺	.13	.19*	36.01	9.10
T2 Marital/relationship satisfaction (parent)	.18 ⁺	.19 ⁺	.25*	.26*	34.34	10.62
T1 Marital expectations	.08	.05	.01	.18 ⁺⁺	6.20	1.39
T2 Marital expectations	.05	-.10	-.22*	.20*	6.23	1.47
T1 Sexual activity (non-intercourse)	-.20*	-.05	-.08	-.07	1.14	.34
T2 Sexual activity (non-intercourse)	.09	.23*	.12	-.16 ⁺	1.32	.67
T1 Sexual intercourse	-.15	-.04	-.02	-.16 ⁺	1.04	.19
T2 Sexual intercourse	.01	.15	.12	-.27*	1.10	.45
Age	-.10	.09	-.13	.15	13.45	.68
Pubertal status	.34**	.42**	.19 ⁺	.14	12.73	2.22
T1 Romantic activities	.23**	.30**	.01	.13	16.88	4.45
T2 Romantic activities	.38**	.48**	.08	.20*	2.49	.78

Notes: *N* ranges from 75 to 83 for T1 and 65 to 71 for T2. ⁺ $p < .09$; ⁺⁺ $p = .06$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, one-tailed. T1: Time 1 assessment; T2: Time 2 assessment. RCI: Romantic Competence Interview; ICQ: Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester et al., 1988); MAHC: Measure of Adolescent Heterosocial Competence (Grover et al., 2005). Marital Satisfaction (parent): Norton Quality Marriage Inventory (Norton, 1983); Pubertal Status: Pubertal Status Scale (Petersen et al., 1988).

($m = 2.8$, S.D. = .59) than girls from intact families ($m = 3.3$, S.D. = .70; t (d.f. = 81) = 2.61, $p = .01$), but scores on the MAHC and ICQ did not differ.

We also expected RCI scores to correlate (negatively) with reports of sexual activity. As Table 3 shows, lower RCI scores were significantly associated with T2 reports of engaging in sexual intercourse (and marginally so at T1; there was also a marginal association with engaging in more non-intercourse sexual activities at T2). This largely was not the case for the other competence measures. They were not significantly associated with reports of engaging in sexual intercourse (and at T2, the correlation with the RCI was significantly stronger ($p < .05$) than with the MAHC and other-sex ICQ and marginally stronger ($p < .10$) than with the same-sex ICQ). Lower same-sex ICQ was, however, associated with reports of engaging in more non-intercourse sexual activities at T1. In addition, higher other-sex ICQ was associated with reports of engaging in more non-intercourse sexual activities at T2.

Correlations with age, pubertal status and relationship experience

As Table 3 shows, the RCI was weakly, but not significantly correlated with age and pubertal status at T1. Furthermore, RCI scores did not differ among girls who had ($m = 3.2$, S.D. = .64) and had not reached menarche ($m = 3.1$, S.D. = .76; t (d.f. = 73) = -.49, $p = .63$). This also was true for same-sex ICQ (t (d.f. = 76) = -1.30, $p = .20$) and for the MAHC (t (d.f. = 73) = -1.47, $p = .15$). However, for opposite-sex ICQ, girls who had reached menarche ($m = 3.6$, S.D. = .53)

reported significantly greater competence than those who had not ($m = 3.1$, S.D. = .67; t (d.f. = 66) = -3.41 , $p = .001$). Similarly, as shown in Table 3, more advanced pubertal status was associated with greater self-perceived competence on the ICQ opposite-sex and same-sex scales. There was a marginally significant association with the MAHC.

We also found that the RCI was unrelated, at T1, to number of romantic activities, as shown in Table 3. This was also true for the MAHC. However, girls who reported greater competence on the ICQ also reported engaging in more romantic activities, although these correlations did not differ significantly from those with the RCI. RCI scores did, however, differ among girls with relationship experience (current or past) at T1 ($m = 3.4$, S.D. = .70) and those without ($m = 2.9$, S.D. = .67; t (d.f. = 81) = -2.51 , $p = .01$). This was also true for opposite-sex ICQ. Girls with relationship experience ($m = 3.6$, S.D. = .52) reported significantly greater competence than those without ($m = 3.3$, S.D. = .70; t (d.f. = 74) = -2.19 , $p = .03$). This was not true for same sex ICQ (t (d.f. = 76) = -1.56 , $p = .12$) or the MAHC (t (d.f. = 80) = $-.54$, $p = .59$). When analyses were repeated comparing adolescents currently in a relationship at T1 to those not, for opposite-sex ICQ only, girls in a relationship ($m = 3.8$, S.D. = .46) reported significantly greater competence than those not ($m = 3.4$, S.D. = .60; t (d.f. = 74) = -1.98 , $p = .05$).

At T2, as Table 3 shows, higher RCI scores were associated with engaging in more romantic activities during the period of time between T1 and T2. This also was true for the ICQ variables, but not for the MAHC. Similarly, girls who reported romantic involvement during the time from T1 to T2 ($m = 3.4$, S.D. = .68) had significantly higher scores on the RCI than girls who did not report involvement ($m = 3.0$, S.D. = .69; t (d.f. = 69) = 2.16 , $p = .04$). Similar results emerged for the ICQ variables, but not the MAHC.

Relationship experience as a moderator

To explore the possibility that romantic competence might be more salient, meaningful, impactful, or affected in girls' lives when they have or have had actual romantic relationship experiences, we conducted a series of hierarchical regressions predicting each "outcome" variable from the interaction of RCI score and relationship experience (current/previous romantic relationship versus not), controlling for the centered main effects of RCI and experience (16 analyses total). Relationship experience at T1 was included in the analyses predicting each of the 11 T1 variables. Analyses yielded significant interactions for two T1 outcomes: comfort with closeness (*Beta for the interaction* = $-.32$, $t(1,79) = -3.10$, $p = .003$) and number of romantic activities (*Beta for the interaction* = $-.18$, $t(1,79) = -2.04$, $p = .05$). Interactions were probed using procedures of Aiken and West (1991). For girls without relationship experience, lower RCI scores were associated with less comfort with closeness (*Beta* = $.61$, $t(1,24) = 3.79$, $p = .001$). The association was not significant among girls with relationship experience. This is surprising as one might imagine girls with relationship experience would experience stronger links between competence and romantic security. However, perhaps for girls who have no direct experience to rely on when judging security, lack of competence confers feelings of insecurity. Discomfort with closeness may also be one reason why girls do not have relationship experience. In fact, a supplementary t -test indicated that girls without relationship experience ($m = 3.4$, S.D. = .82) reported lower levels of comfort with closeness compared to girls with relationship experience ($m = 3.8$, S.D. = .71; t (d.f. = 79) = -2.09 , $p = .04$).

For romantic activities, there was a moderate positive but non-significant association with competence ($Beta = .32$, $t(1,24) = 1.64$, $p = .11$) among girls without relationship experience, and a weak negative, but non-significant association ($Beta = -.18$, $t(1,53) = -1.31$, $p = .20$) among girls with relationship experience. This effect is consistent with the idea that competence may develop with experience, in that, among girls who have not yet been in a relationship, to the extent that they engaged in more romantic activities, they developed more competence.

For analyses predicting the five T2 variables, relationship experience during the period from T1 to T2 was included. Analyses yielded one significant interaction for reports of sexual intercourse ($Beta$ for the interaction = $-.30$, $t(1,69) = -2.78$, $p = .007$). As with T1, for girls with relationship experience, lower RCI scores were associated with engaging in sexual intercourse ($Beta = -.46$, $t(1,38) = -3.15$, $p = .003$). This was not significant among girls without relationship experience, as none without relationship experience reported engaging in sexual intercourse.

Of course, the three significant moderation effects found in the 16 analyses should be interpreted cautiously as the chance of finding significant effects increases with the number of analyses conducted.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to describe one way of assessing adolescent romantic competence, and to provide preliminary psychometric data for the RCI. Overall, the RCI fared well, in that it demonstrated adequate reliability and validity. Regarding reliability, interviewers coded the RCI with a reasonable level of consistency, rarely disagreeing by more than a 1-point difference, indicating that raters did not view our competence scale in radically different ways.

Convergent and discriminant validity were evidenced in associations with the other competence measures and with relationship security. Importantly, the RCI was associated with the competence measures, but only modestly, indicating our definition of romantic competence is distinct from more general interpersonal and heterosocial competence. This is important from a construct as well as a measurement perspective. Romantic competence, as presently defined, is a unique construct, adding further support for conceiving of and studying adolescent romance separately from other aspects of adolescent peer functioning (see Collins, 2003 for a similar argument). In addition, the RCI is not redundant with existing measures, supporting its utility.

The RCI was uniquely associated with self-reported security in romantic relationships, whereas the other competence measures were associated with both romantic and peer security. This lends support for the specificity of the RCI to romantic relationships. Evidence of criterion validity in the romantic domain also was demonstrated. Lower competence was associated with coming from a non-intact family, with more negative views of parents' marriage, and with parent reports of marital/relationship satisfaction. As noted earlier, evidence for the intergenerational transmission of interpersonal dysfunction exists, particularly for marital problems and divorce (e.g., Amato, 1996; Feng et al., 1999; McLeod, 1991). Although the mechanisms for this are unclear and likely multi-factorial, social-learning processes may be at play, such that adolescents without a successful model for romantic relationships may develop maladaptive attitudes about relationships and may fail to learn the skills required for competence in their own romantic lives (e.g., Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Story et al., 2004). Our findings are in line with these ideas.

Moreover, the associations between parental marital status and the RCI, and between adolescents' perceptions of parents' marriage and the RCI, were unique. The more general competence measures were not associated with these variables, further supporting the criterion validity of the RCI. Of course, adolescents' views do not map perfectly onto what actually has occurred in the parents' marriage (the correlation between adolescent and parent report of marital satisfaction was only .30 at T1 and .36 at T2, $p < .01$). Therefore, it may be that adolescents who are not romantically competent not only have been exposed to negative models of relationships, but also tend to view others' relationships in negative ways.

We also predicted that lower competence would be associated with negative expectations about adolescents' own likelihood of marriage, and tentative support emerged. Less competent adolescents reported a lower likelihood of ever marrying. Although we have no idea whether such expectations will predict future behavior, especially since early adolescents have relatively few relationship experiences on which to draw, that less competent adolescents already hold negative views at an early age is striking, as such views may set the stage for subsequent experience and behavior. As noted earlier, a variety of theories suggest that early relational experiences are internalized and provide a foundation for schemas or models that can guide interpersonal behavior (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; see Messer & Warren, 1995). This has been demonstrated with regard to parent–child relationships and their effect on later romantic relationships (e.g., Collins, Hennighausen, & Christian, 2000; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Roisman, Madsen, Hennighausen, Sroufe, & Collins, 2001). However, whether the same holds true for early romantic relationships is still an empirical question. If it does, then our findings certainly support the importance of focusing on romantic competence at an early age.

Our final prediction regarding criterion validity was that the RCI would be associated with reports of sexual behavior. We considered this a strong test because the RCI theory and scoring are more narrowly defined, and early sexual activity is an important variable that is considered risky and can have negative consequences (e.g., Bingham & Crockett, 1996; Welsh et al., 2003). Importantly, lower RCI scores were correlated with reports of engaging in sexual intercourse at T1 (marginally) and T2 (significantly). Although associations were modest, they indicate that poor romantic competence may be a risk factor for early sexual activity. This did not appear to be the case for the other social competence variables, particularly at T2. Indeed, for some of the other measures, competence was associated with reports of more sexual activity, further supporting the uniqueness and utility of the RCI for understanding important behavior.

We also examined, in a more exploratory way, the role of age, pubertal development, and romantic experience in romantic competence. Not surprisingly, given the restricted age range of our sample, RCI scores were not associated with age and pubertal status. A more thorough examination of whether competence develops with age and maturity will be important for future research. Regarding relationship experience, two noteworthy findings emerged. First, among girls without relationship experience at T1, there was a significant association between number of normative romantic activities reported and competence. This suggests that romantic competence may develop with experience. Second, RCI scores were associated with romantic experiences at T2 and with relationship involvement at both T1 and T2. Although we cannot make firm conclusions about temporal associations, as our study design precludes it, we can tentatively suggest that competence may both develop out of romantic experiences and foster desire for and/or ability to

engage in further romantic experiences. The details of this transaction will be an important focus for future research.

Relationship experience also had implications for the association between RCI scores and two key relationship variables. First, among girls without relationship experience at T1 (compared to girls with), there was a stronger association between poor competence and less comfort with closeness with romantic partners. This suggests that inexperienced girls who lack competence may be more avoidant of intimacy, or that inexperienced girls who are avoidant may fail to develop romantic competence. Avoidance of intimacy also may be one reason why girls do not have relationship experience. Supporting this idea, girls without relationship experience reported lower levels of comfort with closeness compared to girls with relationship experience.

Second, at T2, among girls with relationship experience, there was a significant association between poor competence and reports of engaging in sexual intercourse, suggesting that less competent girls who are in relationships are more likely to engage in intercourse with partners. Although sexual activity was a low frequency behavior among the early adolescents in this sample, that these experiences can be predicted at an early age is notable. As noted above, early sexual activity is a risk factor for other negative outcomes. As such, it may be particularly important to foster romantic competence at a young age during or even before the time that girls are becoming involved in romantic relationships.

Although the RCI performed as expected, further evidence of predictive validity, particularly with regard to a broader range of romantic activities and higher frequency activities will be needed, as will further examination of the role of age and experience in the development of romantic competence. Replication with additional, larger samples also is necessary. This is particularly true with regard to different age groups, different ethnic and cultural groups, sexual minority youth, and boys. The present study was part of a larger project designed to focus on interpersonal functioning and psychopathology specifically among young girls. Although we developed our definition of competence with all adolescents in mind, the extent to which it is applicable to all adolescents is unknown. Regarding gender, in theory, the aspects of competence included in our definition should be gender free, in that the theories we drew on are not gender specific. In addition, adolescent girls and boys appear to show similar developmental progression from same-sex friendships to dating (e.g., Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004). However, adolescent boys and girls vary in important ways that are relevant to romantic competence, including how they conceive of and value romantic relationships (e.g., Feiring, 1996; Zahn-Waxler, 2000), how they behave (e.g., Taradash, Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Costa, 2001), and what they may need (see Cyranowski, Frank, Young, & Shear, 2000). Thus, romantic experiences may have different salience for and effects on adolescent girls and boys. It therefore will be extremely important to study romantic competence among adolescent boys.

In closing, our broad assessment of romantic competence appears reliable and valid, and useful in predicting important romantic experiences and sexual behaviors. We hope that this study will encourage researchers to continue to study what romantic competence is (both its broad and specific aspects), how it develops, and its effect on youth over time. To the extent that this can be accomplished, it may allow for the development of intervention strategies that could foster competence in youth.

Appendix

Sample questions from the Romantic Competence Interview and examples of responses indicating more or less competence

Q: What would you think, feel, and do if you met someone you were attracted to?

Less competence: I would act like a girl, giggle; do things I think he'd like.

More competence: I would act like myself and see what happens between us.

Q: What would you think, feel, and do if you were interested in a particular person?

Less competence: I would send mixed signals to let them know in order to test them; see what they do in response to the varying signals.

More competence: I would try to find out more about them to find out their personality and make sure I really liked them before getting serious.

Q: What would you think, feel and do if someone you were dating cheated on you or flirted with someone else?

Less competence: I wouldn't leave that person but I would cry and break down.

More competence: I would be mad and I don't think the relationship would last. I would get disappointed and I don't think that's right. I'd be angry if it was someone I really liked and had been with for a while. It would be harder to recover if it was longer.

Q: What would you think, feel, and do if you were dating someone and you were unhappy about how the relationship was going?

Less competence: I would cry and be upset, but I wouldn't break up.

More competence: I would tell him what was wrong to see if we could change it. If we could change it, then change it. I'd be glad to tell him what was wrong and happy if we could fix it.

Q: What is your idea of a good relationship?

Less competence: People envy your relationship.

More competence: Both people need to be themselves in front of each other and they should enjoy being with each other.

Q: In general, how important is it to you to be in a romantic relationship or dating someone?

Less competence: Very important. I want to have someone to call mine.

More competence: It is not really that important right now.

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