Socially Competent Communication  
and Relationship Development

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Various workers from a number of different disciplinary shadings have been intrigued by the notion that social behavior is a skill demanding competent performance by the actor. There is nothing new about the idea, which probably goes back at least as far as the ancient Greeks, but the focus of attention and the elements of performance examined by each investigator show considerable variety. In most of its forms, however, the notion boils down to a kind of communication competence, although it is often treated in some other context, such as a psychological, developmental, or environmental one.

In a recent analysis, Spitzberg and Cupach (1985) teased apart some of the subtleties here, but while my analysis is closely based on theirs, I intend to use it to tie together some of the threads that I have already laid out elsewhere (Duck, Miell, & Gaebler, 1980). In brief, that earlier work showed that there is a distinct parallelism between the cues to which adults attend in getting acquainted and the cues to which children attend as they develop their ways of forming friends from early childhood to late adolescence. Based on this, it is my contention that there are significant parallels between certain types of competence, the stages of a relationship’s development, and the nature of the development of children’s understandings of the basis of friendship. I also contend that deficiencies in different types of skills lead to different consequences for relationships and I therefore hope to offer an organization for the literature that, in this context, relates to social competence across the life cycle. I argue for a developmental view of competence in relationships in two senses: a) across the life of the person and b) across the life of the relationship. Into this framework I increasingly weave the concept of language as we proceed. I then briefly introduce a new methodology for studying memory for language in social encounters and finally raise eight questions for future research on children’s social competence.

Although my review of "the children’s literature" is minimal in this chapter, part of my point is to show the value that work on adult relationships has for research on children’s relationships. Theoretical issues that are presently "hot" in the adult field—such as "To whose perspective do we accord the most status in describing relational phenomena?"—seem to me to have very important direct relevance to a literature on children's unpopularity that presently uses teachers' and peers' ratings of rejection interchangeably and does not often ask the "incompetent" child about the goals that the child intended to achieve but that, as rated by outsiders, failed to achieve. While my analysis is thus working steadfastly toward an argument that allows me to propose eight questions about children’s competence that could usefully be researched, the questions themselves are based on a parallel reading of the literature on children’s friendships and other chapters in this volume that I do not detail.

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here. At this point I will offer a preview of these eight questions (which will be discussed in some detail in the last section of the chapter) in order that readers may keep these questions in mind as I pursue the argument that leads to their being asked:

1. Does competence differ as a function of perspective?
2. What is the role of (different) observers' beliefs about friendship in rating a child's social competence?
3. Why do we focus on the ways in which competence grows with the child and do so little work on the development of competence across the life of a child's relationships?
4. Do we too often act as if a child were merely reactive in his or her friendship formation rather than an active social being?
5. Are different competencies required in order to relate to peers, to parents and to teachers?
6. Do we pay enough attention to network factors?
7. Do we too often assume that all children know all peers equally well?
8. Does the personal importance of a rejection depend on who is doing the rejecting?

Types of Social Competence

Even a casual examination of the range of research into social competence across the life cycle shows that the terms "skill" and "competence" have not been consistently used in the scholarly literature. Some speak of social skills at the nonverbal level, some of relationship initiation skills, some of deficiencies in partner attention skills, others of conversational involvement, yet others of linguistic competence, and others of relational skills.

In most recent work on competence, a fundamental level of ability is assumed in the form of cognitive capacities or mentalistic elements that allow competent performance, which is viewed as the ability to achieve desired outcomes and show adaptability across contexts. The emphasis falls on the developmental processes that facilitate or hinder acquisition of adaptability—elements of performance and skill that are assumed rather than elaborated upon by such researchers. Furthermore, McFall's (1982) distinction between trait and molecular approaches to competence is accepted, and social competence models tend to be trait models that search for personality or cognitive factors that predict competent performance, with empathy and role taking singled out as likely suspects. Given the purposes of this chapter, my first question is: At what stages of relating will these factors be most influential? My second thought is: How does language fit in here? To develop an attack on these questions, I will select four levels from those elaborated on by Spitzberg and Cupach (1985) and relate these, in the rest of the chapter, to the notion that even children's relationships can develop in intimacy over time:

1. Social skills. These skills are usually studied by examining the specific behaviors related to the perception of competence (such as those leading to impressions of anxiety, attractiveness, etc.). Research here tends to be "molecular", in the terminology introduced above (McFall, 1982), and to look for particular, situation-specific behaviors that are, may, or may not be related to personality characteristics of the particular persons involved. The assumption is that, to a significant extent, social behavior is based on motor activity that can be taught and learned, and that particular impressions follow from particular patterns of motor activity. At least in early models, the impressions seemed to be treated as very largely context-independent. In normal relationships, competence in such motor activity is usually presupposed, yet in some rejected children competence may be deficient and this shortcoming may prevent their entry into any relationships at all.