# Parenting, self-regulation and social competence with peers and romantic partners

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The present cross-sectional study tested a portion of the tripartite model of familial impacts on self-regulation (Morris et al., 2007) in reference to social competence during early adulthood. $N = 302$ young adults ages 18 to 24 years (64.9% female; 80.4% European American; 10% Hispanic) were recruited through Mechanical Turk ($n = 254$) and the local community ($n = 48$). All participants responded to anonymous online questionnaires about self-regulation, parenting practices, and interpersonal competence with same-sex peers and romantic partners. High parental acceptance and low psychological control were linked to high levels of self-regulation. High social competence in both relationship types was associated with high acceptance and self-regulation; lifetime romantic relationship experience also covaried with high romantic competence. Findings suggest that the tripartite model is applicable to interpersonal competence in emerging adulthood.

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## 1. Introduction

Establishing close ties with friends and romantic partners is a crucial task of late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 1998; Erikson, 1963). Both relationship contexts are vital during this period; young adults who are unable to establish such close ties tend to experience significant distress (Lev-Wiesel, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Sternberg, 2006; Simon & Marcussen, 1999). Strength in peer relations lays a foundation for positive romantic relationships in adulthood (Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, & Dodge, 2013), yet young adults vary in the degree to which they are proficient in each, often perceiving themselves as being more competent in peer versus romantic relationships (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988). Further, individuals also vary in skillfulness across relationship tasks within and across these two relational contexts (Buhrmester et al., 1988).

The present cross-sectional study focuses on self-regulation as a key factor in explaining individual differences in social competence during emerging adulthood. Interpersonal competence has received relatively little attention in the self-regulation literature compared to other outcomes, despite consistent evidence linking high regulation and indicators of social competence into early adolescence (e.g., Li, Zhang, & Wang, 2015), and ultimately to successful resolution of Erikson's

intimacy crisis (Busch & Hofer, 2012). Though the degree to which self-regulation is developmentally stable speaks to the high likelihood of ongoing associations (Tiberio et al., 2016), these linkages are not well understood. Further, what work exists through early adolescence has involved incomplete operationalization definitions of self-regulation, and has utilized measures that omit the long-term capacities for control that emerge during the teen years. These gaps are the focus of the present research encompassing parenting behaviors, self-regulation and interpersonal competence with same-sex peers and romantic partners.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

The tripartite model of familial influences on emotion regulation undergirds the present study (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). Per this model, children's emotion regulation and problem behaviors are linked bidirectionally with youths' experiences in the family context. Specifically, children learn how to regulate their feelings though direct *observation* of family members (e.g., modeling). Secondly, discrete *parenting practices* explicitly and implicitly socialize standards for expressing emotions and strategies for regulating feelings. Thirdly, the family's *emotional climate* (e.g., parent-child attachment, family conflict, etc.) may directly facilitate individual children's regulation or dysregulation. Unpredictable environments characterized by conflict heighten children's negative affect, which then must be managed via regulatory processes. Individual emotion regulation abilities also

mediate the effects of these three dimensions of the family context on adjustment outcomes (e.g., internalizing and externalizing problems, social competence, etc.). The *parent's individual characteristics* (e.g., personality traits) shape the family context and are also predictive of the *child's individual characteristics* (e.g., emotional reactivity) that moderate associations between the family context and the child's regulation and outcomes. Many of these pathways are also included in models of family-of-origin impacts on individuals' relational competence, including the mediating role of self-regulation (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005; Li et al., 2015; Parke, Burks, Carson, Neville, & Boyum, 1994; Rauer et al., 2013). Though Morris et al. (2007) highlighted emotion regulation, a similar argument can be made about the model's applicability to the larger component of self-regulation (defined herein as individuals' abilities to activate, monitor, inhibit, persevere and/or adapt their behaviors, attention, emotions and cognitive strategies in response to internal or environmental feedback and in pursuit of personally-relevant goals in short- and long-term contexts; Moilanen, 2007, 2015).

The present study represents a partial test of this model, targeting parenting practices at the family contextual level (i.e., parental acceptance, psychological control, and firm control), self-regulation as a mediator, and interpersonal competence with same-sex peers and romantic partners as the adjustment outcomes. To date, inquiries on social competence have primarily focused on short-term regulation (i.e., individuals' abilities to inhibit impulses, moderate emotions, or shift attention in the moment or over limited periods of time; Moilanen, 2007). Reflecting growing scholarly acknowledgement of the continued development of long-term regulatory capacities into emerging adulthood (i.e., individuals' capacities for deliberately selecting and prioritizing personal goals, making plans for and monitoring ongoing goal pursuit, and changing strategies or shifting goals in response to self-evaluations over long durations of time; Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008; Moilanen, 2007), the current investigation utilized a comprehensive measure of self-regulation encompassing both short-term and long-term regulatory control. Interpersonal competence was conceptualized as a latent variable reflecting the degree to which individuals attain mastery of five discrete social tasks involved in successful interactions and ongoing relationships with same-sex peers and romantic partners (Buhrmester et al., 1988). The five selected domains/tasks were relationship initiation, negative assertion (i.e., self-assertion of one's personal rights and other-directed negative emotions), personal self-disclosure, the provision of emotional support, and conflict management. The literature review below reflects the considerable variability in the conceptualization of the construct of social competence. Consequently, we discuss evidence for general social competence within specific relationships (e.g., friendships) and across multiple relationship types, as well as outcomes of social competence (e.g., peer victimization).

## 1.2. Self-regulation

Self-regulation supports social competence in peer relationships through early adolescence, in terms of social skills, friendship quality, peer acceptance/rejection and victimization (Blair et al., 2015; Rhoades, Greenberg, & Domitrovich, 2009; Shields & Cicchetti, 2001). Regardless of age, individuals who can control their feelings and behaviors are usually socially-skilled, predictable and desirable relationship partners, while people are more likely to avoid or reject those who struggle to modulate their emotions (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014). The literature provides only indirect evidence for this linkage between self-regulation and social competence after early adolescence. For example, Bartle-Haring and Sabatelli (1997) revealed that high emotional reactivity covaried with low same-sex peer and romantic partner interpersonal competence in emerging adulthood. Similarly, high relationship dissatisfaction and conflict are strongly linked to heightened expression of negative affect and poor emotion regulation in adults (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014; Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson,

1995; Kim, Pears, Capaldi, & Owen, 2009; Vater & Schröder-Abé, 2015). Thus, the direct associations between self-regulation and interpersonal competence were considered in the present study.

## 1.3. Parenting practices

The current investigation is among the first to explore the direct effects of three parenting practices (i.e., parental acceptance, psychological control, and behavioral control) on social competence, in conjunction with their potential indirect effects via self-regulation during early adulthood. Below, each parenting behavior is defined in turn, followed by discussion of the evidence from these distinct lines of inquiry supporting the hypothesized associations. Reflecting an assumption that parenting efforts in early childhood have greater effects than will later efforts (e.g., Tiberio et al., 2016) and gaps in the literature in emerging adulthood, much of this direct evidence pertains to childhood or adolescence. Recent efforts to understand parenting during early adulthood counter this notion, revealing ongoing impacts of parent-child relations in this period (Arnett, 2007; Johnson, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2011).

### 1.3.1. Parental acceptance

Acceptance involves parenting behaviors that display warmth, support, and love (Rohner, 1986). Such exchanges with parents directly socialize positive social-interactional strategies while helping to reduce offspring's negative affect levels, which can interfere with social functioning both directly and indirectly via self-control (Conger et al., 2000). It is likely that parents continue to serve in these roles in emerging adulthood, even if from a distance for mature children who no longer reside at home (e.g., modeling socially competent behaviors, helping adult children to identify strategies for coping with negative affect; Fingerman et al., 2012). Primarily cross-sectional studies support this path between high parental acceptance and high levels of self-regulation in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Baker & Hoerger, 2012; Bowers et al., 2011; Finkenauer, Engels, & Baumeister, 2005; Moilanen, 2007). Longitudinal analyses also demonstrate associations between high maternal and paternal acceptance and children's general social competence (McDowell & Parke, 2009; Putnick et al., 2015). Concerning self-regulation as a mediator, there is evidence supporting this association for social competence specifically in toddlerhood (Spinrad et al., 2007), as well as for overall adjustment in emerging adulthood (Baker & Hoerger, 2012). Thus, direct and indirect effects of parental acceptance were considered.

### 1.3.2. Psychological control

This form of control involves parents seeking to manage their children's actions through manipulating their emotions (e.g., threatening to withhold love; Barber, 1996). In addition to directly modeling socially incompetent behaviors, these practices indirectly lead to social skill deficits and peer rejection via self-regulation; parents model maladaptive regulatory strategies and also generate negative affect that offspring must then attempt to regulate (Attili, Vermigli, & Roazzi, 2010; Scaramella & Leve, 2004). Evidence of harm to self-regulation in the teen and emerging adult years is entirely cross-sectional and restricted to short-term regulatory capacities (Finkenauer et al., 2005; Manzeske & Stright, 2009; Moilanen, 2007). Psychological control also appears to damage children's social competence, such that high levels are linked to experiencing physical and relational peer victimization and rejection during middle childhood and adolescence (Attili et al., 2010; Leadbeater, Banister, Ellis, & Yeung, 2008; Li et al., 2015), as well as perpetrating social aggression and interfering with intimate relations during emerging adulthood (Little & Seay, 2014; Roth & Assor, 2012). Self-control also mediates associations between parental psychological control and social competence outcomes (i.e., peer victimization: Li et al., 2015; capacity for intimacy with a partner: Roth & Assor, 2012).