# "Mind your own business": Social competence and psychopathology as predictors of friendship quality

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### Introduction

#### **Emerging Adults and Friendship**

- Emerging adulthood is a transitional life period between 18 and 25 (Arnett, 2000).
- Friendships are the main source of social support in this developmental period, which is full of life stressors and demands (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998).



Friendships are therefore crucial to examine in order to understand how emerging adults successfully face their many challenges.

#### **Depression/Anxiety and Friendship Outcomes**

- Depressive and anxious symptoms, across different age groups, are associated with poorer friendship quality and less friendship contact (Leaf et al., 1984; Miething et al., 2016; Rudolph, Ladd, & Dinella, 2007; Larkins, 2014; Muris & Meesters, 2002; Muris, Meesters, van Melick, & Zwambag, 2001).
- Emerging adults experiencing greater depressive and anxious symptoms may have lower quality friendships (Miething et al., 2016; Larkins, 2014), which might, in turn, reduce social support that provides protection against stressors.

#### Why the Association?

- It is poorly understood why emerging adults experiencing depressive symptoms have poorer quality friendships.
- To build on the "why" of this association, we want to look at the specific behaviors they engage in, in specific, critical types of situations, that make them less socially competent with their same-sex friends.

#### **Social Competence**

- Ability to match one's behavior to the demands of the situation (Dirks) et al., 2007b).
- Higher levels of social competence are associated with superior friendship quality in emerging adults (Festa et al., 2012).

#### The Current Study

- The current study seeks to develop a rating system for the degree of competence of specific behaviors across different types of situations.
- This will allow us to examine the associations between social competence and both depression/anxiety and friendship quality, and will eventually allow us to test whether social competence mediates the links between anxious/depressive symptomatology and friendship quality.

## Hypotheses

- 1. Greater depressive and/or anxious symptoms will predict lower social competence scores.
- 2. Greater depressive symptoms will predict lower quality friendships.
- 3. Lower social competence will predict lower quality friendships.

## Methods - Phase 1 & 2

#### Phase 1

 Participants described all the difficult situations (e.g. Table 1) that occurred in the past year with a close, same-sex friend (Kirmayer, Dossett, & Dirks, 2015).

#### Phase 2

- Different participants rated each story from Phase 1 along 4 dimensions (frequency, difficulty, criticalness, distress-inducing) on a 5 point Likert-scale.
- 62 stories that scored above the midpoint on difficulty, and criticalness and above 2.0 out of 5 on frequency were chosen for Phase 3.

### Methods - Phases 3-5

#### Phase 3

- N= 181 undergraduate students (100 female, 81 male) ranging in age from 18 to 25 (M=20.41, SD=1.535).
- Participants were presented the vignettes and asked to describe what they would do/say if they were faced with the situations.
- Participants filled out self-report measures of depressive symptoms (CESD) and anxiety symptoms (DASS).
- Participants and a same-sex friend (age range: 18-32, *M*= 20.51, SD= 1.777) completed the Friendship Quality Questionnaire (FQQ), as there is evidence that different judges evaluate the same relationship differently (Dirks, Treat, & Weersing, 2007a).
- The FQQ measures 6 dimensions of friendship (validation and caring, conflict resolution, help and guidance, companionship and recreation, intimate exchange, conflict and betrayal). We looked at all of the subscales separately.

#### Phase 4

- Per vignette, participants were presented with the 10 most common and representative responses generated in Phase 3, and rated how competent each response is on a scale of 1 (least competent) to 4.
- Mean social competence scores were calculated for each of the 10 responses.

#### **Phase 5 – The Current Study**

- In this pilot phase, using the mean scores from Phase 4, a unique, situation-dependent scoring system was developed for 7 randomly chosen vignettes (e.g. Table 1).
- This was done using the mean social competence scores from Phase 4, and our best judgment when necessary.
- Each scoring system allows coders to give a social competence rating to each response on a 4-point scale.

#### **Table 1: Unsolicited Support**

While hanging out with one of your male/female friends, the topic of romantic relationships comes up. All of a sudden, he/she says "I think the reason you have such bad luck with relationships is because of how you behave with people you are interested in".

Rating	Qualitative Description	
1 (least competent)	Person uses swear word with no other response, for example:  • "Shut up"  AND/OR  Person disregards the friend's opinion without providing a reason, for example:  "No other response, for example:  "No other res	
	<ul> <li>"Mind your own business" AND/OR Person criticizes the friend or their behavior, for example:</li> <li>"You're not so great in relationships either" AND/OR Person yells or shouts at the friend OR Person does not respond OR Person tries to change the topic of conversation</li> </ul>	This is a list of who asked for your opinion.  https://www.someecards.com/usercards/viewcard/MjAxMi00MzRmZmQwYzg
2	Person responds by agreeing, or disagreeing with the friend's comment, without prompting further	

discussion or seeking further clarification AND/OR Person makes negative statement about the friend's specific comment, for example:

"That is not a very nice thing to say"

- \*If combined with swear word or criticism of the friend, code as 1, for example:
- "You're such an asshole, you don't understand my relationships"
- "That's not a helpful thing to say, at least I can get a girl/guy"
- \* Responses that involve altering the relationship in a negative way would not code higher than a 2 Person responds by thanking the friend for his/her perspective, for example:
- "I appreciate your concern"
- Thanks for your opinion, I'll think about it" Person asks the friend for clarification on the comment, for example:

"Why would you say that?" Person engages in conversation with the friend about the comment and asks for further advice, for

"What should I do differently?"

Person says that he/she will listen to what the friend has to say, for example: "I'd hear him/her out"

\*If combined with a swear word, or criticism about the friend, or yelling at the friend, or a negative statement about the specific comment, code as a 2, for example:

- "That's not a nice thing to say, why would you say that?" "You're really rude, why would you say that?"
- "That's a fucked up thing to say, why would you say that?" "What the hell?"

# Inter-Rater Reliability

- Two coders scored the responses to the 7 vignettes.
- Using intraclass correlations (ICC), the reliability between the two coders was determined to ensure the scoring systems were well formulated and suitable for use.
- The individual vignette ICCs, as well as the overall ICC, were all in the "good" to "excellent" range (> 0.75), indicating high reliability between coders.

### Results

#### **Hypothesis 1**

We regressed social competence on symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as gender. The overall model was significant (F(2,176)= 2.83, p< .05). A non-significant result was found for both depressive ( $\beta$ = -.05, p= .61) and anxious ( $\beta$ = -.03, p= .77) symptoms. However, there was a main effect of gender on social competence ( $\beta$ = . 21, p= .005). We ran a second model with interactions. There was no significant interaction between gender and depression ( $\beta$ = .08, p= .57), nor gender and anxiety ( $\beta$ = -.07, p= .64).

#### Hypothesis 2

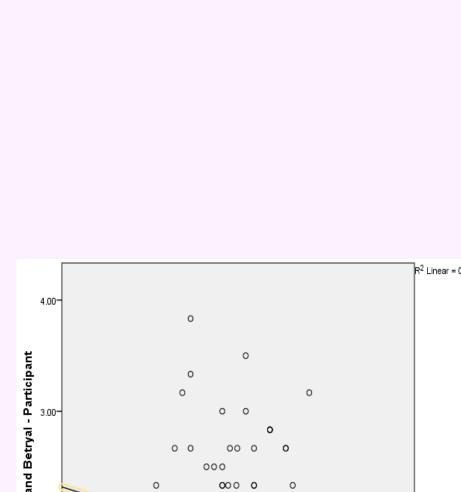
Fig. 1: We regressed friend-reported conflict and betrayal on symptoms of anxiety, depression and gender. The overall model was significant (F(3,133)= 2.80, p< .05). Symptoms of anxiety did not predict friend-reported conflict and betrayal (β= -.05, p= .58). There was a significant effect of depressive symptoms on friendreported conflict and betrayal ( $\beta$ = .21, p< .05). The more depressed the participants were, the more their friends reported conflict and betrayal in the friendship. There was also a significant effect of gender on friend-reported conflict and betrayal ( $\beta$ = -.19, p< .05). Being male was associated with high friend-reported conflict and betrayal in the friendship. Unexpectedly, there was a significant interaction between gender and anxiety scores on friend-reported conflict and betrayal. Friends of more anxious men reported less conflict and betrayal than friends of less anxious men (B= -.04, p<.

We regressed participant-reported conflict and betrayal on symptoms of anxiety, depression and gender. The overall model was significant (F(3,131)=4.55, p<.01). Symptoms of anxiety did not predict participant-reported conflict and betrayal (β= .16, p= .08), nor did depressive symptoms ( $\beta$ = .13, p= .16). There was a significant effect of gender on participant-reported conflict and betrayal (β= -.22, p< .01). Being male was associated with high participant-reported conflict and betrayal in the friendship.

#### **Hypothesis 3**

Fig. 2: We regressed friend-reported conflict and betrayal on social competence scores and gender. The overall model was not significant (F(2, 135) = 1.75, p = .18).

We regressed participant-reported conflict and betrayal on social competence scores and gender. The overall model was significant (F(2,133)=4.99, p<.01). There was a marginal effect of gender on participant-reported conflict and betrayal (β= -.16, p= .06). Being male was associated with high participant-reported conflict and betrayal in the friendship. There was a significant effect of social competence scores on participant-reported conflict and betrayal (β= -.20, p< .05). This finding indicates that participants' lower social competence scores predict higher participant-reported scores on the conflict and betrayal dimension of the FQQ.



Discussion

- Depressive symptoms are associated with friends' impressions of conflict and betrayal in friendship.
- Social competence is associated with one's impressions of conflict and betrayal in friendship.
- Methodological importance of using an open-ended, situation specific, measure of social competence
- With more vignettes, we will be able to separate the situations into 4 categories (friend transgression, participant transgression, conflict, support), and make predictions that are more context-dependent. For example, it may be the case that depressive symptoms only predict lower social competence scores in conflict situations.

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