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**What's Competence Got to Do with It? The Association Between Romantic Competence
and Social Support Behaviors Among Emerging Adult Couples**

A Dissertation Presented

by

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Research has consistently demonstrated that romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are salient experiences that are important to identity development and set the stage for future intimate relationships. One area of emerging research is on romantic competence, or a set of skills an individual possesses that affect how he/she approaches and negotiates romantic relationships. Although research has begun to examine the association between romantic competence and self-reported relationship behaviors and outcomes, it has not objectively assessed behavioral indicators of competence nor has it examined how romantic competence skills are enacted during couple interactions. The main goal of this dissertation was to extend previous research by examining whether social support seeking and social support provision behaviors are associated with romantic competence. Using an actor-partner interdependence model (APIM), this dissertation used data from 89 emerging adult heterosexual couples (M age = 20.65 for males, 20.16 for females) to examine the within-person (actor effects) and between-

partner (partner effects) associations between romantic competence and behaviors exhibited during social support couple interaction tasks. In addition, the role of relationship satisfaction in the association between competence and behavior was examined. Key findings indicated that for women, higher romantic competence was associated with more positive and less negative support seeking behavior, and more positive support provision behavior, even when relationship satisfaction was entered as a covariate in the model. For men, higher romantic competence was associated with less negative support seeking behavior, and was marginally associated with less negative support provision behavior, even when controlling for relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, some partner effects emerged, highlighting the importance of examining the dyadic process. The association between behavior and the individual domains of romantic competence (i.e., mutuality, learning, insight, and emotion regulation) are also discussed. These findings extend our understanding of how romantic competence affects dyadic processes, and have clinical implications for relationship education programs as well as psychotherapy that may be focused on improving relationship functioning. Finally, these findings are discussed within the context of emerging adulthood and the importance of this developmental period.

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Introduction

Research has consistently demonstrated that romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are normative and salient experiences that are important to identity development and future intimate relationships. Moreover, positive romantic involvement during this developmental stage is associated with a number of benefits, such as positive self-esteem (e.g., Bouchey, 2007; Samet & Kelly, 1987), and healthy sexual development (e.g., Welsh, Haugen, Widman, Darling, & Grello, 2005), whereas poor quality relationships are associated with negative outcomes, such as alcohol and drug use (Thomas & Hsiu, 1993), an increase in depressive symptoms (e.g., Joyner & Udry, 2000), and engaging in risky sexual behavior (Blum, Beuhring, & Rinehart, 2000). Given that romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are considered the building blocks that set the stage for adult relationships (e.g., Shulman & Kipnis, 2001), and adult relationships are associated with physical and psychological well-being (e.g., Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000), it is important to examine the components that lead to healthy relationships. One area of emerging research is on the construct of romantic competence, or a set of skills an individual possesses that affect how he/she approaches and negotiates romantic relationships (Davila et al., 2009, 2015). Although research has begun to examine the association between romantic competence and self-reported relationship variables and outcomes, prior research has not objectively assessed behavior with a romantic partner, which is important since people are generally poor reporters on their own interpersonal behavior (see Weiss & Heyman, 1990). As such, the main goal of this dissertation was to extend previous research on romantic competence by examining the association between romantic competence and observed social support seeking and social support provision behaviors in a sample of emerging adult heterosexual couples.

Emerging adulthood.

An area of interest in developmental psychology over the past 15 years has been on the stage of emerging adulthood. Arnett (2000) defined this period as the time from late adolescence to the twenties, with a focus on ages 18-25. He describes this period as being relatively free from adult social roles (i.e., spouse, parent), and where little about the future has been decided and is open to exploration. For most individuals in industrialized countries, this time period is important and often filled with profound change. Moreover, when adults are asked to consider the most important events in their lives, they often name events that took place during this time (Martin & Smyer, 1990). Furthermore, given changes over the past half century, the nature of development in late adolescence and the early to mid-twenties has changed tremendously. For example, the percentage of individuals who are choosing to obtain higher education has risen significantly, with over 58% of 25-year-olds obtaining education past the high school level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In addition, individuals at this age are now delaying marriage, with the median age of first marriage being 29 for men and 27 for women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011). Given these societal shifts, emerging adulthood is associated with its own normative experiences and outcomes, which are distinct from adolescence and adulthood.

Emerging adulthood is distinct from adolescence in that, during adolescence, it is highly normative for individuals to live with their parents, attend secondary school, and be part of a school-based culture (Arnett, 2000). While some individuals continue to experience these in emerging adulthood, it is much less normative. Furthermore, although identity formation has traditionally been associated with adolescence (e.g., Erikson, 1950), the majority of identity formation for youth today occurs during emerging adulthood. For instance, research has shown that identity achievement is rarely accomplished by the end of high school and often continues

through the twenties (Valde, 1996). Emerging adulthood is also distinct from young adulthood, defined as the thirties, in that individuals ages 18-25 often do not consider themselves adults, may still be obtaining higher education, and are often unmarried (Arnett, 2000).

Romantic relationships during emerging adulthood.

Romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are important and developmentally salient and normative experiences that are a major source of support. By the age of 18, more than 70% of emerging adults report having had a romantic relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Moreover, among 17 and 18 year olds, the mean duration of relationships is over one year, suggesting that by emerging adulthood, a large percentage of adolescents have developed the ability to become involved in steady romantic relationships (e.g., Carver et al., 2003; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Furthermore, by this age, individuals report that romantic relationships are a major source of affection, intimacy, and support (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999) and are more important sources of emotional support than are family members (Furman & Shomaker, 2008; Furman & Wehner, 1997).

In addition to being a common and normative experience, romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are associated with both positive and negative outcomes. For instance, positive romantic involvement, defined as relationships characterized by support and positive affect, during late adolescence and emerging adulthood is associated with a number of benefits, including greater social competence (Neeman, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995; Pearce, Boergers, & Prinstein, 2002; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001), positive self-esteem (Bouchey, 2007; Samet & Kelly, 1987), increased perceptions of romantic appeal (Furman & Winkles, 2012), and healthy sexual development (Welsh et al., 2005). On the other hand,

negative or poor quality relationships are associated with alcohol and drug use (Thomas & Hsiu, 1993), an increase in depressive symptoms (e.g., Joyner & Udry, 2000), and engaging in risky sexual behavior and its associated consequences, such as unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Blum et al., 2000).

Further, as stated above, developmental theorists have long acknowledged the importance of this developmental stage on identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Sullivan, 1953). Romantic relationships during emerging adulthood provide the opportunity for working through components of self-concept (see Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Erikson, 1968; Feiring, 1999) and the opportunity to learn and establish relational patterns that can influence the course of subsequent relationships (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Furman & Flanagan, 1997; Seiffge-Krenge, Shulman, & Kiessinger, 2001; Sullivan, 1953). Specifically, a number of researchers and theorists have posited that these early experiences can serve as templates for future relationships, and may be the building blocks for adult relationships, including marriage (e.g., Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006; Sullivan, 1953). Indeed, studies have found that higher quality adolescent and emerging adulthood romantic relationships predict greater commitment and more adaptive adult romantic behavior (e.g., Madsen & Collins, 2011; Meier & Allen, 2009). Importantly, the influence of these early relationships on adult relationships persists even when controlling for the influence of peer and parent relationships (Madsen & Collins, 2011). Given that romantic relationships during adulthood are associated with physical and psychological well-being (e.g., Reis et al., 2000), and relationships during emerging adulthood set the stage for adult relationships (e.g., Shulman & Kipnis, 2001), it is important to examine relationships during this developmental stage in order to identify causal links to healthy and unhealthy adult romantic relationships.

Romantic competence.

An area of emerging research is on romantic competence, or the extent to which an individual possesses a set of skills relevant to healthy romantic functioning. Davila and colleagues (2009, 2015) delineated three skill domains: (1) insight/learning, which includes the ability to think about romantic relationships in a thoughtful, insightful way, to learn from previous romantic experiences and relationships, and to be able to think about the consequences of one's actions; (2) mutuality, which includes the ability to understand that relationships consist of two individuals and their varying needs and to work towards each partner's relational needs while maintaining respect for oneself and one's partner; and (3) emotion regulation, which includes the ability to be aware of and regulate emotions in an adaptive manner in response to relationship experiences, to keep relational experiences in perspective, and to maintain self-respect and make effective decisions in emotional situations. Romantic competence can be assessed with a semi-structured interview, the Romantic Competence Interview (RCI; Davila, Steinberg, Ramsey, Stroud, Starr, & Yoneda, 2009; Davila et al., 2015) in which trained interviewers ask participants how they would think, feel, approach, and behave in hypothetical and actual romantic and sexual situations. Questions on the RCI are designed to assess various areas of romantic functioning, including partner selection, romantic involvement, relationship content and quality, and cognitive and emotional processes in the relationship. Furthermore, questions involve typical experiences (e.g., being romantically attracted to someone), potential betrayal situations (e.g., your romantic partner flirts with someone else or cheats on you), and potential rejection situations (e.g., your romantic partner breaks up with you), and interviewers use the gathered information to assign codes to the three individual domains as well as a global

score. As described further in the Methods section, for this study, the Emerging Adult version of the RCI was utilized for this study.

Romantic competence has been shown to be associated with a number of self-reported relationship behaviors and outcomes. For instance, among adolescent females, greater romantic competence is associated with engaging in a greater number of typical romantic behaviors, such as having a crush or flirting with a potential romantic partner, and with higher quality romantic relationships (Davila et al., 2009; Shulman, Davila, & Shachar-Shapira, 2011). On the other hand, lower competence is associated with engaging in sexual intercourse at an early age (Davila et al., 2009). A number of studies have recently examined romantic competence in older adolescents (e.g., over the age of 16; Shulman et al., 2011; Shulman, Zlotnik, Shachar-Shapira, Connolly, & Bohr, 2012) and emerging adults (i.e., college-aged individuals; Davila et al., 2015). These studies have found that older female adolescents who possessed higher levels of romantic competence reported greater romantic involvement and had more stable relationships (Shulman et al., 2011), whereas adolescent girls from divorced families exhibited lower levels of competence and romantic involvement (Shulman et al., 2012). Furthermore, among emerging adults, greater romantic competence was associated with greater romantic security, healthier relationship decision making, greater relationship satisfaction, and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Davila et al., 2015).

To date, research has not objectively examined behaviors associated with romantic competence. The RCI asks participants to report on previous and current romantic experiences as well as what they would do in hypothetical situations (if they have not experienced a particular romantic or sexual situation), but it is unknown whether a participant's response will translate to actual behavior with a romantic partner. It is important to objectively assess actual behavior in a

given situation since people are often unable to report on their own behavior and behavioral sequences accurately (see Weiss & Heyman, 1990). For example, in one study, researchers had couples report on their own withdrawal behavior during conflict as well as the withdrawal behavior of their spouse. Results indicated that there was only moderate agreement between partners on each other's conflict behavior ($r = .41$) and even smaller magnitudes of agreement between self-report of withdrawal behavior and report of partner's withdrawal behavior with outside coders ($r = .33$ and $r = .39$, respectively; see Weiss & Heyman, 1990). As such, objectively assessing and coding behavior is likely to result in the most accurate measure of an individual's romantic competence.

Furthermore, romantic competence has been examined almost exclusively in females; only one other study to date (Study 2; Davila et al., 2015) has examined romantic competence in emerging adult men, and as such, our understanding of possible gender differences in level of romantic competence and in the associations between romantic competence and relationship behaviors is limited. The single study examining romantic competence in men did not find gender differences in the overall level of romantic competence or in the association between competence and relationship security, relationship satisfaction, or symptoms of depression and anxiety (Study 2; Davila et al., 2015). However, that study relied on self-report measures and did not examine potential gender differences in relationship behavior. Although adolescent males and females show similar developmental trajectories with regard to romantic development, research has demonstrated that boys differ from girls on how they behave in relationships (see Cyranowski, Frank, Young, & Shear, 2000 for a review). As such, it may be that romantic competence is enacted differently within the relationship among men and women.

Behavior during Couple Interactions.

Researchers have long recognized the strength and importance of directly observing participants' behavior (e.g., Margolin, John, & Gleberman, 1998; Noller & Feeney, 1998). Directly examining interaction behavior between a dyad provides clear, specific information on the interactional processes and allows researchers the opportunity of knowing what people actually do in their relationships, rather than relying on what they say they do. This is particularly important because, as stated before, this information cannot be obtained from self-report or other-report alone and self-report data can be unreliable (Henry, Moffit, Caspi, Langley, & Silva, 1994; Weiss & Heyman, 1990), particularly when the events are within the interpersonal domain (Christensen & Nies, 1980). Indeed, in one study, researchers examined the extent of agreement between prospective and retrospective measures of psychosocial variables (i.e., subjective psychological states and family processes) and found low levels of agreement (Henry et al., 1994), suggesting that relying on self-report data may result in inaccurate data.

Stemming from the social learning model, which posits that a couple's interaction patterns largely determines their relationship functioning (e.g., Jacobson & Margolin, 1979), there is a large research literature examining interactions in married couples (see Heyman, 2001; Weiss & Heyman, 1990; 1997 for reviews). Typically, couples have been videotaped while engaging in a problem-solving discussion or while discussing areas of conflict within their relationship. Then, trained observers code the interactions using a microanalytic coding system to assess behaviors that occurred during the interaction and the sequence of these specific behaviors (see Kerig & Baucom, 2004 and Kerig & Lindahl, 2001 for reviews of the most commonly used interaction coding systems). Researchers have tended to collapse behaviors during interactions into positive and negative categories.

Negative behaviors. Gottman and colleagues have identified a number of negative behaviors that predict declines in relationship quality and negative outcomes. For example, he identified five behaviors that lead to negative reciprocity, or the escalation of negative behavior within the interaction: (1) criticism, or a comment that suggests there is something wrong with one's partner; (2) defensiveness, or when a partner interrupts to ward off an attack, usually in the form of whining or playing the innocent victim; (3) contempt, or statements that come from a position of superiority, often resulting in mocking or putting down one's partner; (4) stonewalling, or withdrawing from the situation either physically or emotionally; and (5) belligerence, or aggressive anger that contains threats or provocations (Gottman, 1994; 1998; 1999). Other negative behaviors often coded in couple interactions include complaining, interrupting, negative physical contact (i.e., aggressive or controlling physical contact), and stubbornness.

In addition, there are a few behavioral sequences that have been shown to have a detrimental effect on relationship quality. One sequence, called the demand-withdraw sequence, is when one partner is demanding and/or critical, while the other partner withdraws and/or avoids the interaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Another, called negative reciprocity, is when there is an escalation of negative behavior within the interaction, such as when one partner's negative behavior is reciprocated and/or escalated by the other partner (Gottman, 1979). Both of these behavioral patterns have been tied to relationship dissatisfaction (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2007; Margolin & Wampold, 1981).

Positive behaviors. Research on positive behaviors within couple interactions is still in the early stages. The typical conflict-resolution paradigm has informed researchers on what

relationally satisfied couples do *not* do that may protect them from relationship distress, but it has not elucidated what they do to promote adaptive functioning. An expanding area of research is focused on social support provision and receipt, which is examined by having couples discuss individual problems or difficulties unrelated to the relationship (e.g., Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). In most coding schemes, positive behaviors include approval, agreement, validation, interest/curiosity, humor/laughing, smiling, assent, compromise, and physical affection.

Furthermore, behaviors such as empathic accuracy, dyadic perspective taking, social support, making repairs following conflict, or de-escalating negative affect during a conflict, have been shown to impact relationship quality and stability (e.g., Gottman, 1998; Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003). Empathic accuracy is the ability to correctly identify the thoughts and feelings of another individual (Ickes, 1993). It is distinct from understanding trait-like characteristics of other people, and rather, it refers to inferences about transient internal states. Higher levels of empathic accuracy have been shown to be associated with greater relationship satisfaction in both adults (Simpson et al., 2003) and adolescents (Haugen, Welsh, & McNulty, 2008). Social support refers to how romantic partners help one another deal with personal difficulties. Given that managing personal problems is an aspect of relational functioning, and that romantic partners are common and important sources of support (e.g., Beach, Martin, Blum, & Roman, 1993), it is not surprising that couples who demonstrate higher quality behavior during social support interactions report higher relationship satisfaction (e.g., Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Pasch, Bradbury, Davila, & Sullivan, 1999). Finally, dyadic perspective taking, or the ability to put oneself in another person's place and understand the other person's point of view, has also been shown to be associated with higher relationship satisfaction and better relationship outcomes, such as greater stability and duration of the

relationship (e.g., Cohen, Schulz, Weiss, & Waldinger, 2012; Davis & Oathout, 1987; Long & Andrews, 1990).

The association between behavior and relationship satisfaction. From these studies examining couple interactions, a large body of evidence has accumulated demonstrating that the quality of interaction is consistently related to ratings of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Weiss & Heyman, 1990, 1997). Relationship satisfaction is the degree to which a romantic partner is pleased and content in his/her present relationship and desires to maintain the relationship. Relationship satisfaction is often interchangeably used with the terms relationship quality and relationship adjustment (Graham, Liu, & Jeziorski, 2006; Yu & Adler-Baeder, 2007). Satisfaction is an important aspect of healthy romantic functioning and has been shown to buffer against psychological distress and contribute to well-being (e.g., Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996; Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996). As such, it is often either examined as an outcome in relationship research or controlled for in analyses to examine the impact of other variables above that of satisfaction.

Longitudinal research has consistently shown that behavior within one's relationship is significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction (see Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000 for a review). For instance, greater levels of negative and hostile behavior, fewer positive and friendly behaviors, and greater levels of negative reciprocity are associated with relationship dissatisfaction (e.g., Gottman, 1998; Heyman, 2001). In addition, Gottman (1994) reviewed negative behavior typical of distressed couples and found that these couples had a lower ratio of friendly to hostile behavior, and were more critical, defensive, and contemptuous towards their partner. Furthermore, the demand/withdraw pattern is associated with lower satisfaction both concurrently (Christensen, 1987) and longitudinally (e.g., Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth,

1995). On the other hand, couples who demonstrate higher rates of positive behavior during their interactions report higher relationship satisfaction, both concurrently and longitudinally (Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Markman, 1979; 1981). Furthermore, a meta-analysis found a significant association between relationship satisfaction and overall personal well-being (defined by lower depressive symptoms, higher life satisfaction, higher self-esteem, higher global happiness, and better physical health; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007).

Emerging adult couple interactions. There are only a handful of studies that have examined interaction behavior in emerging adult couples. In a recent study, researchers examined the association between positive and negative behaviors during a conflict task and participant's stress responses, as measured by HPA axis activation (Laurent, Powers, Laws, Gunlicks-Stoessel, Bent, & Balaban, 2013). Results indicated that emerging adult couples face similar consequences of negative reciprocity and demand-withdraw patterns as well as benefits from supportive behavior during conflict (Laurent et al., 2013). Another study, conducted by van Dulmen and colleagues (2012), found modest correlations between self-reported and observationally assessed verbal aggression among emerging adult couples. Further, they found that while both assessments were uniquely associated with relationship satisfaction, only self-reported verbal aggression was related to relationship dissolution within the following six months (van Dulmen, Mata, & Klipfel, 2012). Finally, a third study found that emerging adults who had a romantic partner who disengaged and recovered from conflict quickly during a "cool-down" task reported more positive emotions about the relationship and greater relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, the individual who recovered from conflict faster did not report more favorable relationship outcomes (Salvatore, Sally, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, & Collins, 2011). Thus,

although researchers are beginning to examine couple interactions during emerging adulthood, these processes remain understudied and there is much to clarify.

Social Support Interactions.

Marital research has traditionally focused on distinguishing satisfied couples from dissatisfied couples. As such, there has been almost an exclusive focus on conflict resolution interactions, given that early research found differences in how satisfied and dissatisfied couples approached conflict (see Heyman, 2001 for a review). Furthermore, because social support was originally conceptualized as purely positive in nature, its potential significance in understanding relationship functioning (and relationship distress) was downplayed (see Cutrona, 1996; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Pasch, Harris, Sullivan, & Bradbury, 2004). However, more recent research has started to focus on behaviors that promote relationship satisfaction and stability, and as such, research has started to examine social support interactions among couples.

Social support processes are a key component to healthy relationships. Early work on the construct delineated three categories of assistance/help that comprise social support: (1) informational support (e.g., providing advice, suggestions, problem-solving); (2) instrumental support (e.g., doing a concrete task to help accomplish a goal); and (3) emotional support (e.g., providing validation, warmth, comfort under emotional distress; e.g., Cobb, 1976; 1979; Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981; Taylor, 2007). Having high levels of social support have been linked to better individual psychological and physical health outcomes. For example, social support has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety during times of stress (e.g., Fleming, Baum, Gisriel, & Gatchel, 1982; Lowe, Chan, & Rhodes, 2010). In addition, social support has been linked to physical health benefits, such as positive adjustment to

coronary heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, cardiac disease, arthritis, and cancer (e.g., Holahan, Moos, Holahan, & Brennan, 1997; Stone, Mezzacappa, Donatone, & Gonder, 1999).

Within the romantic relationship literature, social support has also been shown to have significant effects on relationship functioning. Notably, romantic partners are often a frequent and important source of support (e.g., Beach et al., 1993; Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Julien & Markman, 1991) and support from other sources does not compensate for a lack of support from one's partner (Brown & Harris, 1978). Moreover, there is growing evidence that social support promotes healthy relationship functioning and higher quality relationships. For instance, receiving high levels of social support from a romantic partner predicts higher relationship satisfaction (e.g., Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Julien & Markman, 1991). Indeed, social support behaviors have been shown to be predictive of relationship satisfaction two years later (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) and ten years later (e.g., Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010). In one study of married couples, self-reported social support behaviors within the relationship (e.g., confiding in one's partner, receiving care while ill, talking when upset) not only was significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction, but also sexual satisfaction, overall happiness, life satisfaction, and satisfaction with family life (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994). Furthermore, a recent study found that highly satisfied newlywed couples that demonstrated more negative behavior while providing support were more likely to divorce within the first 10 years of marriage, suggesting that poor social support skills may make couples more vulnerable to dissolution, regardless of relationship satisfaction (Lavner & Bradbury, 2012).

In addition, there is research suggesting that examining social support behaviors may be more highly predictive of long-term relationship outcomes than examining conflict resolution behaviors. For example, Pasch and Bradbury (1998) found that behaviors exhibited in social

support interactions predicted changes in relationship satisfaction over and above behaviors displayed during conflict resolution interactions. In addition, social support behaviors moderated the relationship between conflict resolution behavior and relationship satisfaction, such that negative behaviors during conflict resolution tasks had less of a negative impact on satisfaction when there was strong social support in the relationship (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Furthermore, these effects appear to persist over time. In a study of newlywed couples, Sullivan and colleagues (2010) had couples complete conflict resolution tasks as well as social support tasks (one per person, for a total of four interactions) and then followed these couples for ten years. They found that both support behavior and conflict resolution behavior at the beginning of marriage predicted changes in relationship satisfaction, but only support behavior predicted the likelihood of divorce within the first ten years of marriage. Moreover, support behavior predicted changes in conflict behavior, but not vice versa (i.e., conflict behavior did not predict changes in support behavior), suggesting that social support alone predicts long-term relationship satisfaction and relationship status directly and indirectly through changes in behavior in the conflict resolution domain (Sullivan et al., 2010). Furthermore, they found that difficulty in seeking and providing social support at the beginning of marriage led to increased negativity in conflict resolution tasks one year later, suggesting that one reason that couples with poor social support skills may divorce over the first ten years of marriage may be partly due to increases in negative conflict behavior over time. The authors posited that social support behaviors may be more important than conflict resolution behaviors because conflict may be rare or low in intensity, particularly in satisfied couples, whereas being able to be vulnerable and make personal self-disclosures and receive support from one's partner may set the stage to more

adaptively confront relationship difficulties (Sullivan et al., 2010). Taken together, these research studies highlight the importance of examining social support processes in romantic relationships.

Romantic competence and social support behaviors.

The proposed study was the first attempt to examine what behaviors are associated with romantic competence. Although this study examined social support, there is no theoretical reason to believe that social support behaviors are exclusively related to competence. Indeed, it is expected that romantic competence would be associated with behaviors related to conflict negotiation and problem solving. However, given that a well-designed study failed to find expected associations between conflict resolution behavior and relationship outcomes among emerging adults (M age = 21.2; Kim, Capaldi, & Crosby, 2007), I focused on social support, given the important associations between social support and concurrent and longitudinal relationship functioning (outlined above) and the higher likelihood of finding associations between competence and behavior. Again, although prior research has not examined the associations between romantic competence and social support behaviors, there were reasons to expect competence would be related to being able to seek and provide social support in an adaptive manner.

Insight/learning. Insight/learning includes the ability to think about romantic relationships in an insightful way, to learn from previous romantic experiences, and to be able to think about the consequences of one's behavior. With regard to seeking social support, insight is necessary to identify the problem at hand, to understand oneself and one's partner, and to anticipate what each person's reactions and behaviors may be in a given situation. Furthermore, greater insight/learning skills may help an individual approach their partner for support in a more

adaptive manner since he/she is able to pull from previous experiences and to think about the consequences of his/her approach. These skills are also necessary for providing social support to one's partner. For example, in order to provide social support in an adaptive manner, an individual must be able to understand his/her own and his/her partner's vulnerabilities, behavioral patterns, and reactions. Furthermore, an individual may need to adapt how he/she provides support based on previous positive or negative experiences.

Mutuality. Mutuality includes the ability to think about each partner's needs and to work towards meeting each partner's needs in a way that maintains respect for oneself and one's partner. Mutuality skills are also likely to be necessary in seeking and providing social support. For example, in order to seek social support, an individual first has to be able to identify the problem and what need (which can be outside of the relationship) is not being met. Moreover, in conjunction with emotion regulation skills, he/she needs to be able to communicate the problem and need in a clear and calm manner. This can include being able to tell his/her partner what type of support is wanted (i.e., informational, instrumental, emotional) and being able to do so in a non-hostile manner. In providing social support, mutuality skills are necessary to be able to take their partner's perspective and to understand what his/her needs are and how to engage in mutual problem solving to accomplish these needs. This may require adapting one's perspective with new information and compromising in order to find a suitable solution for both partners.

Emotion Regulation. Emotion regulation skills, as assessed by the RCI, include being aware of one's emotions, being able to regulate emotions in difficult romantic situations, being able to keep relationship experiences in perspective, and being able to maintain self-respect and make effective decisions in emotional situations. Strong emotion regulation skills are important to social support in several ways. It is important to note that although emotion regulation skills

are often thought of in the context of trying to decrease negative emotions, they actually refer to processes of increasing, maintaining, or decreasing both negative and positive emotions (Parrott, 1993). Therefore, it is important to not only regulate negative emotions, but positive ones as well. In seeking social support, emotion regulation skills may be necessary to identify the problem, which may require being able to identify the primary emotion (e.g., fear, sadness, shame) in a given situation and being able to regulate secondary emotions (often anger) that may mask the primary emotion. Moreover, it is necessary to regulate emotions when determining the best time to broach a topic with a partner, when asking for help, and when tolerating difficult or intense negative feelings before, during, and after seeking support. Furthermore, although one can seek (and receive) social support through maladaptive methods (e.g., suicidal gestures, non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors), this is likely to have negative long-term consequences for the relationship (e.g., Zannarini et al., 2014). Emotion regulation skills are also necessary to provide adaptive social support. This may require being able to understand and validate one's partner's emotions, being able to tolerate negative emotions during and after the discussion, and not responding in an impulsive or maladaptive manner.

The current study.

The aim of this dissertation was to extend the current literature on romantic competence by examining whether social support behaviors are associated with romantic competence among emerging adult couples. To do so, I recruited a sample of emerging adult heterosexual couples and had each individual complete the Romantic Competence Interview-Emerging Adult version (RCI-EA) as well as two 8-minute social support interaction tasks with their partner (one support discussion per partner). Following an adapted version of the Social Support Interaction Coding System (SSICS; Bradbury & Pasch, 1994), set forth by Beck and colleagues (2006), interactions

were coded for overall positive and negative behavior. Each individual received social support provision scores (from the interaction in which they were helping their partner) and social support seeking scores (from the interaction in which they were discussing a chosen personal problem).

This study consisted of dyadic data, and as such, the nonindependence of the data was taken into consideration for data analyses. Therefore, I utilized the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, 1996; Kenny & Cook, 1999). The APIM allows researchers to examine the influence of an individual's own score on a predictor variable on his/her own outcome (i.e., the actor effect), as well as the influence of an individual's own predictor variable on his/her partner's outcome (i.e., the partner effect). Given that this study was the first to examine behavior associated with romantic competence, only hypotheses about actor effects were made; that is, associations between one's own romantic competence and support behavior. Given the documented association between relationship satisfaction and couple behavior, satisfaction was included as a covariate in the APIM analysis to examine the unique effect of competence on behavior.

Primary Aims and Hypotheses.

Primary Aim 1. To examine the within-person associations (actor effects) between romantic competence, social support behaviors, and relationship satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1. Greater global romantic competence was expected to be associated with seeking and providing support in a more positive, and less negative, manner during the interaction (actor effect).

Hypothesis 2. Higher relationship satisfaction was expected to be associated with seeking and providing support in a more positive, and less negative, manner during the interaction (actor effect).

Primary Aim 2. To examine the role of relationship satisfaction in the relationship between romantic competence and social support behavior during the interaction. Specifically, relationship satisfaction was included in the APIM to examine the unique effect of romantic competence on social support behaviors.

Secondary Aims.

Secondary Aim 1. Exploratory analyses were conducted to examine gender differences in RCI scores as well as gender differences in the level of positive and negative support behavior during the interaction. Given that a prior study did not find differences in romantic competence between men and women (Davila et al., 2015), I predicted that there would be no significant difference in romantic competence between men and women. Because APIM analyses were run for each partner's chosen topic, and therefore, both partners' support seeking/provision behavior was not included in the same model, gender differences in the association between competence and social support behavior could not be statistically examined and compared to one another.

Secondary Aim 2. In addition to examining the relationship between the global romantic competence score and social support behavior, exploratory analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between each individual domain and social support behavior. Since the individual domains of the RCI have not been examined in prior research, no a priori hypotheses were made.

Secondary Aim 3. The partner effects present in the APIM were also examined. No *a priori* hypotheses were made.

Method

Participants

A sample of 89 heterosexual college-aged couples (i.e., 89 men, 89 women) who were between 18 and 25 years of age and who had been in a committed relationship for a minimum of three months (a common duration used in relationship research) were recruited in two ways: (1) target participants were recruited from the Stony Brook University Human Subjects Pool and were asked to invite their romantic partner to participate; and (2) additional target participants were recruited from the Stony Brook University campus using flyers and advertisements placed around campus (e.g., department and library bulletin boards, commuter lounges, lecture hall buildings). Potential participants were excluded from the study if they: (1) were less than 18 years of age or were over 25 years of age; (2) were not in a committed romantic relationship of at least three months; (3) had a romantic partner who was not willing to participate in the study; (4) were married or were raising a child with their partner; (5) could not read and/or write English; (6) had reading, vision, or motor problems that would affect completion of study tasks; or (7) objected to being audio- and/or video-recorded as part of the study. Participants did not need to be Stony Brook students to be eligible. Couples where both partners did not meet eligibility requirements were not allowed to participate.

For the current study, the mean age of male participants was 20.65 years ($SD = 1.82$) and the mean age of female participants was 20.16 ($SD = 1.63$). The average relationship length was 73.9 weeks ($SD = 76.5$ weeks). Couples were ethnically diverse; 52.8% of males described themselves as Caucasian, 22.5% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 15.7% as Latino, 4.5% as Middle

Eastern, 3.4% as Black/African American, and 1.1% as another ethnicity; 41.6% of females described themselves as Caucasian, 33.7% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 11.2% as Latina, 5.6% as Black/African American, and 7.8% as another ethnicity. The vast majority of participants were students, with only four females and four males (4.5% each) indicating that they were not enrolled in school. There was fairly even representation of year in school, with 18% of females and 15.7% of males indicating that they were freshman, 28.1% of females and 20.2% of males indicating they were sophomores, 27.0% of females and 34.8% of males indicating they were juniors, 20.2% of females and 16.9% of males indicating they were seniors, and 2.2% of females and 7.9% of males indicating they were graduate students.

Procedures

Overview. Potential participants who saw the study advertisement through the Psychology department participant pool or from flyers on campus and were interested in participating were instructed to contact the study coordinator via email. The study coordinator provided a detailed description of the study procedures, including the various tasks involved, the estimated amount of time of the lab visit, and the compensation provided. In addition, the study coordinator verified that each member of the couple was interested in participating and conducted a telephone screen of each participant (i.e., the individual who contacted the study coordinator provided contact information for his/her partner so each partner could be screened) to make sure they met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Specifically, each participant was asked: (1) How old are you?; (2) Is your partner willing to come to the lab visit with you?; (3) Are you and your partner in an exclusive, committed relationship?; (4) How long have you and your partner been in a committed relationship?; (5) Are you and your partner married?; (6) Are you and your partner raising a child together?; (7) Can you read and write in English?; (8) Can

you understand and speak English fluently?; (9) Do you have any reading, vision, or motor problems that would prevent you from being able to read and respond to online questionnaires?; and (10) Do you have any objections to being audio-recorded and video-recorded as part of the study? In order to participate in the proposed study, potential participants had to respond to the aforementioned questions with the following answers: (1) Any age between 18 and 25; (2) Yes; (3) Yes; (4) Any duration over three months; (5) No; (6) No; (7) Yes; (8) Yes; (9) No; and (10) No. Those who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria signed up for a scheduled time slot to attend the lab visit at the Stony Brook University Psychology Department. Written consent from each participant was obtained at the beginning of the lab session. Participants first individually completed a brief battery of online questionnaires, using the program Qualtrics, which assessed individual demographics, relationship demographics, and current relationship satisfaction. Following this, partners were interviewed separately by trained research assistants using the RCI-EA (see below for a detailed description of the interview and the Appendix for the full interview). Following the interview, participants individually completed a second battery of online questionnaires (that were non-relationship focused) and were unrelated to the proposed study. The final part of the lab session consisted of a series of timed couple interaction tasks. Finally, all participants were debriefed, provided with a list of counseling referrals, and were compensated accordingly (see *Compensation* below). The total visit was approximately 2.5 hours.

Compensation. Participants who were enrolled in a current Psychology course and elected to receive research credit for completing the study received 2.5 research course credits. Individuals who were not participating for research credit were compensated \$25 in cash at the end of the lab visit. As such, there were three possible compensation outcomes for the couple: (1)

the couple received no money and a total of 5 research credits (2.5 research credits per person) if both participants received research credit; (2) one participant received 2.5 research credits and the other participant received \$25 or; (3) the couple received \$50 total (\$25 per participant) if each participant received monetary compensation.

Measures.

Demographics. Basic demographic information, such as age, gender, education/employment status, and ethnicity/race, was collected.

Romantic Relationship Demographics. Information on the participant's current romantic relationship, such as length of relationship, cohabitation status, and future expectations of the relationship were collected.

Romantic Relationship Satisfaction. Current relationship satisfaction was assessed with the 16-item version of the Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI-16; Funk & Rogge, 2007; see Appendix for measure). The CSI-16 is self-report measure in which participants respond to 10 global evaluations of their romantic relationship on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = *not at all true/never*; 5 = *completely true/all the time*) and six characteristics of their relationship on a bipolar adjective scale (e.g., 0 = *miserable*, 5 = *enjoyable*). A total score was calculated by summing the responses to all of the items, with higher scores indicating higher relationship satisfaction. High internal consistency has been reported in previous college-age dating samples (Cronbach's alpha = .95; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012), which is in line with the current study (alpha = .92). In addition, the CSI-16 has excellent construct validity and strong convergent validity with the most commonly used measures of relationship satisfaction, such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976, $r = .89$), and the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959, $r = .90$) (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Although the DAS and MAT are widely used

in marital research, they have come under criticism by researchers (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994), most notably for the heterogeneity of their items and the likelihood that these items are confounded with other important couple constructs, such as communication. In addition, given that both the DAS and MAT were designed for married couples and the DAS was designed to distinguish satisfied couples from discordant couples, the CSI-16 was more appropriate for our sample of emerging adult couples, who were unmarried and highly satisfied.

Interview and Coding Procedures.

Romantic Competence Interview. Two separate research assistants (i.e., one for each partner) conducted the Emerging Adult version of the Romantic Competence Interview (RCI-EA; Davila et al., 2009, 2015; see Appendix for interview). As stated in the introduction, the RCI is a semi-structured interview which is designed to assess the overall romantic competence of a participant by assessing the broad domains of insight/learning, mutuality, and emotion regulation. Although prior studies have generally utilized a combined insight/learning domain, these domains were coded separately, since early piloting of the RCI-EA in emerging adult women (see Davila et al., 2015) indicated that some participants demonstrated insight, but not learning from previous experiences. As such, each participant received a score on the four individual domains and an overall global competence score. Participants answered questions on their thoughts, feelings, approaches to, and behaviors in actual and hypothetical romantic and sexual situations. Participants were asked about typical romantic experiences (e.g., being romantically attracted to someone), potential betrayal situations (e.g., your romantic partner flirts with someone else or cheats on you), and potential rejection situations (e.g., your romantic partner breaks up with you). In addition, since participants were all in a current relationship,

interviewers asked about the communication and support, trust, conflict resolution, and mutuality of the current relationship. Through these scenarios, interviewers assessed participants' decision-making processes, how and where they learn about romantic relationships, and how much importance they place on romantic relationships. The length of the interview ranged from 30 to 60 minutes depending on relationship experience and verbosity of each participant.

Interview Coding. Immediately following completion of the interview, the interviewer used the information gathered from the interview to assign individual domain scores (i.e., insight, learning, mutuality, emotion regulation) and a global competence score code on a 5-point scale (1 = *no evidence of competence*; 5 = *significant level of competence*) with half points possible. Good convergent and discriminant validity have been reported, as the RCI is only modestly correlated with other measures of social competence, suggesting a distinct construct (Davila et al., 2009, 2015). Furthermore, the RCI was found to correlate with other measures specific to romantic relationships, such as romantic security. The criterion validity is also high, as demonstrated by lower romantic competence being associated with coming from a non-intact family, having more negative views of one's parents' marriage, and parental reports of lower marital satisfaction (Davila et al., 2009).

Reliability of Interview Coding. Interviews were audio taped for reliability purposes (although interviewers coded each interview immediately following the completion of the interview). To assess reliability, 40 RCIs (i.e., 20 male interviews, 20 female interviews) were coded by a second coder (22.5% of sample). An intraclass correlation (single measure, random, absolute method) was used to analyze reliability. As shown in Table 2, the ICCs for the global romantic competence score as well as the individual domains were between .74 and .90,

indicating excellent reliability among the coding team. There were no discrepancies of more than ½ a point between coders; as such, codes from the original coder were used in analyses.

Couple Social Support Interaction Tasks and Coding Procedures.

Experimental Protocol. A third research assistant (i.e., not either of the research assistants who conducted the RCIs) introduced the social support interaction tasks. The research assistant followed the protocol set by Bradbury & Pasch (1994). Before the interaction began, each partner was asked to identify a personal characteristic, problem, or issue that he/she wanted to change. The research assistant explicitly restricted both partners from choosing a topic that was a source of major tension and/or conflict in the relationship. The research assistant also presented a list of common topics (e.g., losing weight, academic/career difficulties and/or changes, improving family or friend relationships, being more assertive, dealing with stress, being more organized; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) and asked each partner to disclose their topic to ensure that it was not relationship-based. After deciding on their topics, the couple completed two 8-minute discussions with each partner playing the role of the support seeker (i.e., the individual talking about a personal issue that he/she wants to change) and the support provider (i.e., the individual talking to his/her partner about an issue that the partner wants to change). The research assistant randomly chose one individual to begin with and asked that individual to “talk about something that you would like to change about yourself.” Partners were instructed to “be involved in the discussion and respond in whatever way you wish.” The research assistant left the room for 8 minutes and videotaped the interaction. At the end of the 8 minutes, the research assistant returned and reversed the roles, providing the same instructions.

Coding Interaction Tasks. A modified version of the Social Support Interaction Coding System (SSICS; Bradbury & Pasch, 1994) was used to code social support behavior. The original

SSICS is a microanalytic system in which each speech turn of each partner is coded for positive and negative behaviors. Coders used a modified global coding system in which overall behavior during the interaction was coded (see Appendix for coding scheme). The global coding system has been utilized in previous studies (Beck, Davila, Farrow, & Grant, 2006). To ensure objectivity, each coder only coded one support task per couple (i.e., the coder assessed both partner's behavior in one interaction but did not code the other interaction). Because I had no a priori hypotheses about how romantic competence may be related to individual subscales, two codes – overall positive behavior and overall negative behavior – were made on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *not present*; 2 = *moderately*; 4 = *extremely*) for each partner's behavior. Both the frequency and quality of the behavior during the interaction was considered. Behaviors included in the “providing support positively” composite included behaviors such as validating their partner's feelings, making specific suggestions or giving helpful advice, encouraging the discussion, and providing physical comfort or affection. Behaviors in the “seeking support positively” composite included expressing appropriate feelings related to the topic, asking for help in a useful way, and responding positively to their partner's questions or suggestions. Behaviors in the “providing support negatively” composite included criticizing or blaming their partner, insisting that their partner adopt his/her recommendations, being inattentive or disengaged, and talking about oneself instead. Finally, behaviors in the “seeking support negatively” composite included behaviors such as demanding help, whining or complaining, and acting defensively. See the Appendix for the full coding scheme.

Reliability of SSICS Coding. To assess reliability, 18 social support tasks for each gender (i.e., 18 interactions in which the male partner is the support seeker and 18 interactions in which the female partner is the support seeker) were coded by a second coder (20.2% of sample). An

intraclass correlation (single measure, random, absolute method) was used to analyze reliability between the original coder and the reliability coder. The ICCs for the SSICS codes ranged from .67 to .83 (see Table 4), indicating good to excellent reliability (Cicchetti, 1994). Discrepancies were discussed among coders and consensus ratings were used in analyses.

Data Analytic Plan

Power Analysis

As Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) noted, there are two key considerations when assessing power in dyadic data. The first concern consists of sufficient power to test for nonindependence. Testing for nonindependence assesses the probability of detecting whether the scores of a given variable are significantly correlated among members of the dyad. Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) recommend having a minimum of 25 dyads before testing for nonindependence. Although that is the minimum recommended, having additional dyads allows for greater power. The second key consideration concerns the reduction or increase in power that occurs when the unit of analysis is changed from an individual to a dyad. Since the exact method for calculating power for the APIM is complicated, Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) recommend the following approximation: compute the Pearson correlation for the predictor variable between partners and treat it as a between-dyads variable if $r > .50$ or a within-dyads variable if $r < -.50$. For all other values, they recommend ignoring the nonindependence when estimating power and using the unadjusted effect size measure. As such, power was calculated using Cohen's (1988) recommendations of setting power at .80, or having an 80% chance of ruling out the null hypothesis. In a power analysis in which power is set to .80, the alpha is set to .05, and a medium correlation between dyad members is used ($r = .30$; Cohen, 1988), a minimum of 84 dyads are necessary. Therefore, our proposed sample of 89 couples is sufficient.

Test for nonindependence

To test for nonindependence, I ran two-tailed Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients examining the degree of similarity between the two members of the couple on the outcome variables (positive and negative social support seeking and provision behavior). The correlations between partners were as following: seeking support positively $r = .08, p = .44$; providing support positively $r = .24, p = .02$; seeking support negatively $r = .25, p = .02$; and providing support negatively $r = .15, p = .17$. Although these correlations are modest, two of the types of behaviors are significantly correlated, and as such, I used the dyad as the unit of analysis in analyses.

Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM)

The actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, 1996; Kenny & Cook, 1999) is an advanced statistical technique that handles the nonindependence of dyadic data. The APIM treats the dyad as the unit of analysis, rather than the individual, which allows for the independent and simultaneous estimation of both actor effects and partner effects. Actor effects examine the influence of an individual's own score on a predictor variable on his/her own outcome, whereas a partner effect examines the influence of an individual's own score predictor variable on his/her partner's outcome variable. The APIM also examines three types of variables: (1) between-dyad variables, which are variables that are shared by both members of the dyad, but may vary across dyads (e.g., relationship length); (2) within-dyad variables, which are variables that vary across the members of the dyad, but each dyad in the sample has the same total score (e.g., gender); and (3) mixed variables, which are variables that vary both between and within dyads (e.g., age of each member). In the current study, the within-dyad variable was gender and the mixed variables were the global romantic competence score,

relationship satisfaction, and social support behavior (either seeking support or providing support depending on the interaction). Separate APIMs were run for the two social support interactions.

Data Analytic Approach

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in AMOS (v. 22) was used. Although Multilevel Modeling (MLM) has also been used for APIM analyses, SEM with distinguishable dyads is the simplest approach for estimating the APIM since the model can be directly estimated using a well-known data analytic method and interpretation of actor and partner effects are straightforward (Kenny et al., 2006).

As suggested by Kenny and colleagues (2006), the data were structured so that each individual participant has their own scores (as the actor) as well as their partner's score's listed (as the partner) within the same data row (i.e., each couple occupied two data rows). All dyads were included in analyses, and the couple was the unit of analysis. There was no missing data.

Two main analyses were conducted (i.e., one for the woman's support task and one for the man's support task). In each APIM, actor effects referred to each participant's romantic competence score predicting their own positive and negative social support behavior. Partner effects in the APIM referred to each participant's romantic competence score predicting their partner's positive and negative behavior. Relationship satisfaction was added to the APIM as a covariate, and had corresponding actor and partner effects on behavior.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations amongst the romantic competence domains for men and women can be found in Table 1. In the current study, the mean global RCI score was 3.57 ($SD = .63$) for males and 3.64 ($SD = .58$) for females. The means, standard deviations, and correlations for each of the social support behavior codes are shown in Table 3. Furthermore,

participants reported a high level of relationship satisfaction, as the mean for satisfaction in the current study was 70.44 ($SD = 7.58$) for males and 70.36 ($SD = 9.78$) for females, which is above the distress cut-off score of 51.5 set by Funk and Rogge (2007).

Question 1. Is romantic competence associated with more adaptive social support seeking and provision behaviors? I specified two separate APIMs where each partner's global RCI score predicted their own positive and negative behavior (See Figure 1). Separate models were designated for the male/female topics (i.e., one for interactions where the female was the support seeker and one for interactions where the male was the support seeker). Although I only predicted actor effects, paths representing both within-person (actor effects) and cross-partner associations (partner effects) were included. Errors were correlated within-persons between the positive and negative support seeking (or support providing) behavior. Errors were also correlated cross-partners between support seeking and providing behavior. Global romantic competence scores for each partner were also specified to be correlated, and were found to be significantly correlated ($r = .25, p = .02$). As such, the original models were saturated, and therefore, model fit was not computed. However, as discussed below, when non-significant paths were removed from the model, fit was assessed.

For the female support task, both actor and partner effects emerged. For females, competence was associated with seeking support in a more positive manner ($\beta = .33, p = .002$) and seeking support in a less negative manner ($\beta = -.23, p = .03$). For males, competence was marginally associated with providing support less negatively ($\beta = -.19, p = .08$), but not with providing support more positively ($\beta = -.07, p = .51$). With regard to partner effects, female's competence was associated with males providing support more positively ($\beta = .26, p = .01$), suggesting that when females have greater competence, they may elicit more positive behavior

from their partner. For males, competence was marginally associated with females seeking support in a less negative manner ($\beta = -.20, p = .06$). When non-significant paths were dropped, the resulting model provided a good fit to the data, $X^2(3) = 1.18, p = .76, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00$.

For the male support task, partner's competence was again correlated ($r = .25, p = .02$) and actor effects, but not partner effects, emerged. For males, greater romantic competence was associated with seeking support less negatively ($\beta = -.22, p = .04$), but competence was not significantly associated with seeking support more positively, although the association was in the expected direction ($\beta = .16, p = .21$). For females, competence was associated with providing support in a more positive manner ($\beta = .27, p = .03$), but not with providing support less negatively ($\beta = -.12, p = .43$). When non-significant paths were dropped, the resulting model provided a good fit to the data, $X^2(6) = 5.37, p = .50, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00$.

Question 2. Is relationship satisfaction associated with more adaptive social support seeking and provision behaviors? Again, I specified two APIMs where each partner's relationship satisfaction score predicted their own positive and negative support seeking/provision behavior (see Figure 2). Again, separate models were designated for the male and female topics, and paths representing both actor effects and partner effects were included. Errors were correlated within-persons between the positive and negative support seeking (or support providing) behavior. Errors were also correlated cross-partners between support seeking and providing behavior. Relationship satisfaction scores for each partner were found to be moderately correlated ($r = .48, p < .001$). Across both APIMs, only female satisfaction was associated with seeking support in a more positive manner ($\beta = .25, p = .04$). No other actor or partner effects were significant.

Question 3. Is romantic competence uniquely associated with social support seeking and provision behaviors? Given that our first analysis demonstrated that romantic competence was associated with behaviors related to seeking support and providing support, I controlled for relationship satisfaction in the model to examine the unique effects of competence on behavior. To do so, I again specified the two APIMs described in the first analysis, but also included relationship satisfaction for each partner as a predictor variable (See Figures 3 and 4). As such, eight new paths were included – four actor effect paths between relationship satisfaction for each partner and their individual positive/negative behavior, and four partner effect paths between satisfaction and their partner’s positive/negative behavior. In addition, each partner’s satisfaction scores were correlated with one another as were their overall romantic competence and satisfaction scores. Partners’ relationship satisfaction scores were moderately correlated ($r = .47$, $p < .001$), and their competence scores were weakly correlated ($r = .21$, $p = .04$). Females’ competence and relationship satisfaction were significantly correlated ($r = .27$, $p = .006$), but males’ competence and satisfaction were not significantly correlated ($r = .11$, $p = .24$).

For the female task, there were no significant paths between satisfaction and behavior for either partner. However, there were significant paths between competence and behavior. Specifically, for females, competence was associated with seeking support in a more positive ($\beta = .28$, $p = .009$) and less negative manner ($\beta = -.23$, $p = .03$). For males, competence was associated with providing support less negatively at a trend level ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .09$), but was not associated with providing support in a positive manner ($\beta = -.08$, $p = .44$). With regard to partner effects, females’ competence was associated with their partner providing support more positively ($\beta = .24$, $p = .03$) and males’ competence was marginally associated with their female partners seeking support less negatively ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .08$).

For the male task, similar to the female task, no paths between satisfaction and behavior were significantly associated. For males, competence was associated with seeking support less negatively ($\beta = -.23, p = .04$) and for females, competence was associated with providing support more positively ($\beta = .24, p = .03$). There were no other significant actor effects and none of the partner effect pathways were significant.

Secondary Aim 1. Are there gender differences in level of romantic competence or level of positive and negative social support behavior? In order to examine whether there were gender differences in overall romantic competence level or levels of insight, learning, mutuality, or emotion regulation, I conducted a series of paired-samples *t*-tests (to test if male and female partners within the couple differed) and independent-samples *t*-tests (to test if men and women as distinct groups differed) for each RCI-EA subscale. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations for each RCI-EA subscale by gender. There was not a significant gender difference in level of competence for any of the subscales when either a paired-samples *t*-test (smallest $p = .15$) or an independent-samples *t*-test (smallest $p = .21$) was run. Similarly, to examine whether there were gender differences in the level of positive and negative support seeking and support provision behaviors, I conducted a series of paired-samples *t*-tests and independent-samples *t*-tests for each of the SSICS codes. See Table 3 for means and standard deviations for each of the SSICS codes by gender. There was no significant difference in level of positive and negative behavior among men and women using a paired-samples *t*-test (smallest $p = .16$) or independent-samples *t*-test (smallest $p = .22$).

Since two separate APIMs were run for each partner's chosen topic, both partner's support seeking/support provision behavior was not included in a single model. As such, we

were unable to statistically test whether there are gender differences in the association between competence and social support behavior.

Secondary Aim 2. What is the relationship between the individual domains of the RCI-EA and social support behavior?

For each of the following analyses, I ran two APIMS – one for each partner’s support task. I specified the APIMs in a similar manner described earlier, except that I used the individual romantic competence domains as the predictor variables rather than the global romantic competence score. Relationship satisfaction was included as a covariate in each model.

Insight. As shown in Figures 5 and 6, partners’ insight scores were significantly correlated ($r = .33, p = .003$), as was their satisfaction scores ($r = .47, p < .001$). Furthermore, female insight scores were significantly correlated with satisfaction ($r = .25, p = .009$), but male insight scores were not significantly correlated with satisfaction ($r = .14, p = .13$). For female tasks, female insight was significantly associated with seeking support in a more positive ($\beta = .27, p = .02$) and less negative manner ($\beta = -.24, p = .03$). There were no other significant paths. For male tasks, there was a marginal association between male romantic competence and seeking support less negatively ($\beta = -.19, p = .09$). There were no other significant actor or partner effects.

Learning. As shown in Figures 7 and 8, partners’ learning scores were not significantly correlated ($r = .14, p = .19$). Satisfaction was moderately correlated again ($r = .46, p < .001$). Furthermore, female learning scores were significantly correlated with satisfaction ($r = .29, p = .003$), but male learning scores were not significantly correlated ($r = .13, p = .18$). For female tasks, female learning scores were associated with seeking support in a more positive ($\beta = .24, p$

= .03) and less negative manner ($\beta = -.24, p = .03$). There were no other significant paths. For male tasks, the only significant path was between female learning scores and providing support more positively ($\beta = .22, p = .05$).

Mutuality. As shown in Figures 9 and 10, partners' mutuality scores were weakly correlated ($r = .19, p = .07$), and satisfaction was moderately correlated ($r = .45, p < .001$). Furthermore, female mutuality scores were not significantly correlated with satisfaction, although the strength of the association suggests that it may be significant in a larger sample ($r = .29, p = .07$). Male mutuality scores were not significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction ($r = .05, p = .62$). There were no significant paths between relationship satisfaction and behavior in either task. Female mutuality was associated with seeking support more positively ($\beta = .30, p = .006$). There were no associations between male mutuality and support provision behavior. With regard to partner effects, female mutuality scores were associated with males providing support more positively towards their female partners ($\beta = .22, p = .05$), and male mutuality scores were associated with their female partners seeking support less negatively ($\beta = -.24, p = .02$). For male tasks, male mutuality scores were associated with seeking support less negatively ($\beta = -.21, p = .05$), but not with seeking support in a more positive manner ($\beta = .12, p = .28$). Female mutuality scores were marginally associated with providing support in a more positive manner ($\beta = .20, p = .08$), but were not associated with providing support less negatively ($\beta = -.002, p = .99$). No other pathways were significant.

Emotion Regulation. As shown in Figures 11 and 12, partners' emotion regulation scores were significantly correlated ($r = .27, p = .01$), as was relationship satisfaction ($r = .47, p < .001$). Furthermore, female emotion regulation scores were not significantly correlated with satisfaction ($r = .12, p = .21$), nor were male emotion regulation scores and satisfaction ($r = .13,$

$p = .16$). For female tasks, female emotion regulation scores were significantly associated with seeking support more positively ($\beta = .28, p = .007$) and marginally associated with seeking support in a less negative manner ($\beta = -.20, p = .06$). Male emotion regulation scores were associated with providing support less negatively ($\beta = -.25, p = .02$). With regard to partner effects, female emotion regulation scores were associated with males providing support more positively ($\beta = .22, p = .04$), and male emotion regulation scores were marginally associated with their female partners seeking support less negatively ($\beta = -.20, p = .06$). There were no other significant paths. For male tasks, male emotion regulation scores were associated with seeking support in a more positive ($\beta = .30, p = .006$) and less negative manner ($\beta = -.25, p = .02$). No other pathways were significant.

Discussion

This dissertation was designed to examine the association between romantic competence and behaviors associated with seeking and providing social support in a sample of heterosexual, emerging adult couples. By examining behaviors exhibited by each partner during social support interaction tasks conducted in the laboratory, objective assessments of behavior were gathered, rather than relying on self-reported behavior, which is often inaccurate (see Weiss & Heyman, 1990). Furthermore, by including relationship satisfaction as a covariate in the APIM, the unique effect of romantic competence on social support behavior was examined. First, I discuss the results of the primary aims of this dissertation - the associations between overall romantic competence, relationship satisfaction, and social support behavior. I next discuss the results of the secondary aims, including an examination of gender differences, and the individual romantic competence domains. Finally, I discuss clinical implications of these findings, limitations of this study, and areas for future research.

The primary aim of this dissertation was to examine the associations between overall romantic competence and positive/negative behaviors associated with seeking and providing social support. I hypothesized that higher levels of overall competence would be associated with seeking and providing support in a more positive, and less negative, manner. Although generally consistent with this hypothesis, the findings point to a more nuanced pattern of results. Specifically, even when controlling for relationship satisfaction, for women, greater overall romantic competence was associated with seeking and providing support more positively, as well seeking support less negatively. Women's competence was not associated with providing support to their partner in a less negative manner. For men, on the other hand, greater romantic competence was associated with seeking support less negatively. Although the association with providing support in a less negative manner did not reach significance, the effect was in the expected direction, and it is likely that it would reach significance in a larger sample. Notably, for men, romantic competence was not significantly associated with seeking or providing support in a more positive manner. This was somewhat surprising, particularly since men did not show an overall lower rate of positive support seeking or support provision behavior.

Partner effects only emerged during the female's chosen task. In that APIM, greater female romantic competence was associated with their male partner providing support more positively. This is interesting given that male romantic competence on its own was *not* associated with more positive support provision behavior. Thus, it may be that women with greater overall competence are able to elicit positive behavior from their partner. For example, through behavioral reciprocity, it may be that when females act in a more positive manner while seeking support, their male partners reciprocate that behavior, and thus, are more positive when responding and providing support. It could also be that competent women are better able to

articulate the issue and the help they would like from their partner, which allows their partner to respond in turn. The other partner effect that emerged was that greater male romantic competence was associated with female partners seeking support in a less negative manner. Again, it may be that men who are more competent behave in such a way that their partner is less negative when asking for support. For example, it may be that women who have competent partners expect their partner to help or provide support if they ask, and as such, they approach that situation in a less negative manner (e.g., less whining or excessive reassurance seeking). Given that these are cross-sectional associations, it is important to recognize that causality cannot be inferred. Indeed, another possibility may be that men who provide support more positively, and women who seek support less negatively, end up with more competent partners.

With regard to the association between relationship satisfaction and the social support behaviors, I hypothesized that relationship satisfaction would be positively associated with positive behavior and negatively associated with negative behavior during the interaction. Contrary to hypotheses, only relationship satisfaction for the female partner was associated with seeking support in a more positive manner, although this pathway became non-significant when romantic competence was added to the model. This was somewhat surprising given that previous studies have found a significant relationship between support behavior and concurrent satisfaction (e.g., Pasch & Bradbury, 1997; Sullivan et al., 2010). However, there are two aspects of our sample that may explain the contrary findings. First, the samples for both of the previous studies discussed consisted of newlywed couples. As such, it may be that the association between satisfaction and support behavior is stronger among more highly committed couples. Along those lines, our sample was very highly satisfied; in fact, only six individuals (one male, five female; 3.4% of sample) scored in the relationship distress range. Moreover, eight individuals (4.5% of

sample) had the maximum score possible on the measure. Thus, even though newlywed samples are generally satisfied, it may be that this study's sample had a restricted relationship satisfaction range due to a ceiling effect, and thus, I was unable to detect significant associations.

In addition, in the models that included relationship satisfaction as a covariate, I examined the correlations between competence and satisfaction. For females only, with the exception of the emotion regulation domain, higher competence was positively associated with relationship satisfaction. Although these associations were not significant for men, they were in the expected direction, and as such, it appears that the link between satisfaction and competence is stronger for women. Given that the direction of causality was not examined in this study, it will be important for future research to examine possible explanations for this association. For example, it may be that women who are more competent engage in more adaptive behaviors within the relationship, and are better able to get their needs met, which results in higher satisfaction. It could also be that being in a relationship that is satisfying allows for an environment to exist in which adaptive behaviors are more likely to occur, which can develop or enhance competence. Moreover, there may be mediators of this association, such as romantic attachment; in that case, greater competence may lead to greater security in the relationship, which then leads to higher satisfaction. In fact, Davila and colleagues (2015) found that emerging adults with greater overall romantic competence reported higher levels of relational security, although those data were cross-sectional as well, precluding a conclusion on the direction of causality. Longitudinal research will be necessary to examine how romantic competence and relationship satisfaction influence one another and possible moderators and mediators of this association.

One of the secondary aims of this dissertation was to examine gender differences in romantic competence. I was unable to statistically examine if there was a difference in the association between competence and support behavior for men and women since both partner's support and provision behavior were not included in the same model. Given that there is some evidence that behavior may be dependent on which partner chooses the topic (i.e., male-partner initiated or female-partner initiated; e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998; Klinetob & Smith, 1996), I felt that it was important to retain two separate APIMs to examine these associations. However, based on the pattern of results, it can be inferred that romantic competence is associated with behaviors associated with seeking and providing support for both men and women.

With regard to gender differences in the RCI-EA subscales, both paired-samples *t*-tests and independent-samples *t*-tests were used to examine men and women's scores on the RCI-EA individual domains and global code. Both sets of analyses results revealed no significant difference between men and women's romantic competence scores on any of the individual domains or the global romantic competence score. Although this is one of the first studies to examine gender differences in romantic competence (see study 2; Davila et al., 2015 for an exception), and further replication will be necessary, the findings from this study suggest that men and women exhibit comparable levels of romantic competence across domains. This is notable, because studies have found gender differences in childhood and adolescence with regard to how girls and boys approach interpersonal relationships, and how much competence they demonstrate with regard to certain behaviors within relationships, such as self-disclosure, and managing conflict (e.g., Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1998; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Thus, the fact that I did not find gender differences in romantic competence suggests that,

at least by emerging adulthood, men and women possess a similar skill level with regard to approaching and navigating romantic relationships and situations. It may be that gender differences exist earlier in development, but by the time men and women enter the emerging adulthood stage, these differences have been eliminated; further research in childhood and adolescence will be needed to examine this possibility.

It is also important to note that, although there were not differences in level of romantic competence, there may be differences in how men and women demonstrate competence. In fact, during coding meetings, RCI-EA interviewers noted differences in the responses that men and women gave to questions on the RCI-EA. For example, in response to a question on how an individual would cope with a relationship dissolution, interviewers noted that men were more likely to provide examples of doing things to distract themselves (e.g., spending more time on schoolwork, keeping busy), whereas women were more likely to give examples of seeking emotional support from others (e.g., talking about the breakup with friends/family, spending more time with friends). This pattern reflects prior findings that demonstrate gender differences in emotion regulation strategies (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011). It is important to note that each individual response was not documented, and as such, it is unclear how much of a difference actually existed between men and women. Although this appeared to be a pattern noted among all interviewers, future research that collects and codes responses in a highly nuanced manner would be necessary to support this notion. Furthermore, this possible difference highlights the importance of using the RCI-EA over self-reported measures of behavior, as there are various types of adaptive (and thus, competent) responses and the context in which behavior is enacted is vitally important to understanding one's level of competence. For example, talking about a relationship breakup may be adaptive if it leads to increased insight and future positive

behavior change, but co-ruminating on the breakup may cross over into maladaptive behavior, which can lead to increases in depressive symptoms (e.g., Starr & Davila, 2009).

Paired-samples *t*-tests and independent-samples *t*-tests were also used to examine the level of positive and negative support seeking and provision behavior by gender. No significant differences emerged. There is little observational data on support behavior among couples, and prior research has been mixed, with most studies finding no gender differences in rates of behavior (e.g., Crowell et al., 2002; Lawrence et al., 2008; Neff & Karney, 2005; Roberts & Greenberg, 2002; Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Ickes, 2007), whereas a few studies have found the only gender difference to be that women exhibit more negative behavior when seeking support (Harris, 2001; Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila., 1997). In this study, there was no significant difference between overall rates of positive and negative behavior between men and women, contributing to the literature finding no gender differences. Furthermore, I found that women with higher competence showed *less* negative behavior when seeking support, which is in the opposite direction of studies finding a gender difference. It may be that highly competent women are able to better regulate negative affect, and thus, are more skilled at seeking support in a positive manner. Indeed, as I discuss below in more detail, there is evidence that the emotion regulation domain may be particularly important in the degree of negativity exhibited during the interaction.

Importantly, previous studies have found a gender difference in social support behavior when participants are asked to self-report on their own and their partner's behavior (e.g., Gurung, Taylor, & Seeman, 2003; Luszczynska, Boehmer, Knoll, Schulz, & Schwarzer, 2007). This suggests that although there is not a difference in actual levels of behavior when couples are observed in the laboratory, there may be a difference in *perceived* support behaviors. Indeed, at

least two studies that have examined observed support behavior as well as perceived support behavior have found a gender difference in perceptions of received support, but not in behavioral observations of support (Lawrence et al., 2008; Verhofstadt et al., 2007). This may be partially due to gender differences in the types of support that men and women provide. For example, a previous study found that women's supportive responses tended to be more focused on emotional processing and instrumental support, whereas men's responses tended to be more focused on informational support and solving the problem at hand (Goldsmith & Dun, 1997). As such, there may be a difference in the types of behavior that men and women perceive as supportive.

The final secondary aim of this dissertation was to examine the individual romantic competence domains and their unique associations with behavior. Since prior research had not utilized the individual domains on their own (instead using the global romantic competence score in all analyses), I did not make any a priori hypotheses. Although the individual domains were highly correlated with the global romantic competence score, when the various models were run, there were mildly different patterns of results, suggesting that possessing skills in certain areas may distinctly affect behavior. However, no single domain accounted for all of the findings, and indeed, the results for the individual domains generally mirrored the overall results. This is consistent with the conceptualization of romantic competence as a broad construct encapsulating related skills necessary for healthy romantic functioning. Furthermore, it supports the use of the global romantic competence score in analyses, unless there is an a priori reason to expect one domain to be more closely related to the outcome variables. First, I examined the insight domain, which refers to the ability to think about relationships in an insightful manner and be able to think about the causes and consequences of one's behavior. There was a modest correlation

between partner's insight scores, suggesting that individuals with similar levels of insight may be more likely to partner up together. Furthermore, as noted before, for women, but not men, there was a significant positive correlation between insight and relationship satisfaction. With regard to associations between insight and support behavior, there were few significant pathways. Specifically, there were no significant associations between male insight and behavior associated with seeking or providing support. Conversely, for females, greater insight was associated with seeking support in a more positive and less negative manner, but was not significantly associated with behavior related to providing support. There were no partner effects. The fact that insight was only linked to how females seek support suggests that women who have a greater awareness of their own needs and their partner's needs and have better consequential thinking may seek support in a more adaptive manner. It may be that women with higher levels of insight have better problem-solving skills, and thus, are able to seek support with a clearer sense of what the issue is and the type of support they are seeking. Indeed, support behavior has been shown to be associated with problem-solving skills, both concurrently as well as longitudinally (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2010).

Next, the learning domain was examined, which refers to the ability to learn from previous experiences and use that data to inform current behavior. In this model, partners' learning competence scores were not significantly correlated, and again, there was a significant positive correlation between learning and relationship satisfaction for women only. Similar to the model with insight, greater ability to learn from prior relationship experiences was associated with seeking support in a more positive and less negative manner for women. In addition, learning was also marginally associated with providing support in a more positive manner for women. There were no significant associations between learning and behavior for males, nor

were there any partner effects. Again, this suggests that women who are better able to learn adaptive messages from previous relationship experiences are able to seek support in a more adaptive manner. Given that scores on the learning and insight domains were so highly correlated in this sample ($r = .92$ for females), the fact that the pattern of effects was the same is not surprising. Being able to have insight into one's behavior and experiences allows for learning to occur, just as being able to learn valuable and accurate messages from relationship experiences allows one to develop greater insight into one's own needs and behavioral patterns.

The mutuality domain reflects the ability to think about each partner's needs and behave in a way that meets each partner's needs while maintaining respect for one another. There was a weak correlation between the two partners' level of mutuality, as well as a moderate correlation between a women's level of mutuality and her relationship satisfaction. When I examined the associations with behavior, I found that, for females, greater mutuality was associated with seeking support more positively and was marginally associated with providing support more positively (which, again, would likely be significant in a larger sample). For men, greater mutuality was only associated with seeking support less negatively. Part of being able to understand one's needs and one's partner's needs involves dyadic perspective taking, or the ability to put oneself in another person's place and understand their point of view. Thus, individuals with greater mutuality may be better at seeing their partner's perspective, which may contribute to more adaptive behavior. Indeed, dyadic perspective taking has been associated with better relationship functioning and outcomes (Cohen et al., 2012; Davis & Oathout, 1987; Long & Andrews, 1990).

In addition, there were two partner effects that emerged for the mutuality domain; the first was that males with higher mutuality had female partners who seek support less negatively.

If dyadic perspective taking is, indeed, one component of mutuality, then it may be that female partners of men with greater mutuality experience higher relationship satisfaction. In fact, one study found that wives' perception of their husbands' perspective taking ability was related to her marital satisfaction (Long & Andrews, 1990). Thus, although speculative, relationship satisfaction may be one mechanism underlying this association, such that women who have partners with higher mutuality are more satisfied in their relationship, and thus, seek support in a less negative manner. The second partner finding that emerged was that females with higher mutuality had male partners who provided support in a more positive manner. In addition to dyadic perspective taking, another skill that may influence mutuality is assertiveness. Voicing one's needs to one's partner allows for greater mutuality to exist for both partners in the relationship. Moreover, research has shown that for women especially, self-silencing (i.e., the suppression of thoughts and opinions due to fear that self-expression will lead to negative consequences), is associated with poorer relationship functioning, relationship dissatisfaction, and depression (e.g., Uebelacker, Courtnage, & Whisman, 2003). Furthermore, in a sample of late-adolescent couples, individuals who had high levels of self-silencing reported poorer communication within their relationship, and their partners reported being more frustrated and uncomfortable when interacting with the self-silencing partner (Harper & Welsh, 2007). As such, if women with greater mutuality are, indeed, more assertive and less likely to silence their needs, their male partners may experience less discomfort during the interaction, and thus, provide support in a more positive manner.

Finally, the associations between the emotion regulation domain and support behaviors were examined. The emotion regulation domain refers to emotional awareness, being able to regulate emotions in relationship situations, and being able to cope and make effective decisions

in emotional situations. Partners' emotion regulation scores were modestly correlated, but emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction were not significantly correlated for either partner. For females, greater emotion regulation was associated with seeking support in a more positive manner, and was marginally associated with seeking support in a less negative manner. It was not associated with behavior associated to providing support. For males, greater emotion regulation was associated with seeking support in a more positive and less negative manner, as well as providing support less negatively. For men, better emotion regulation skills may allow them to be able to identify their need to seek support and regulate any negative affect that may come up due to gender stereotypes about seeking help. Indeed, one study found that men with stronger masculine identities reported that asking for help was a sign of failure, and thus, were less likely to seek support (Wallston, 1976). Another study found that men were less likely to seek support than women, particularly emotional support (Ashton & Fuehrer, 1993). Although participants did not have a choice on whether to seek support in this study (given that they each were assigned to choose a discussion topic), it appears that men who are more competent are able to seek support in a more adaptive manner. It would be valuable for future studies to examine if men who are more competent, particularly in the emotion regulation domain, seek support at a higher rate, and if there are differences in the type of support they seek (e.g., informational, instrumental, emotional). Furthermore, there was one significant partner effect, such that females who had better emotion regulation skills had male partners who provided support more positively. One possible explanation for these findings may be that women who are better at regulating negative emotions are able to ask for support in a more adaptive manner, which then results in higher levels of positivity from their partner. This notion is consistent with

a previous study that found that husbands were less positive when providing support to their wives if their wives had higher levels of negative affectivity (Pasch et al., 1997).

These findings have important implications for clinical interventions that target relationship functioning. Given that competence is associated with more adaptive behavior, one question for future research is whether interventions that specifically teach skills associated with the domains can improve competence? Indeed, many couple-based interventions consist of a skills component (e.g., communication skills training, problem-solving skills training), but these interventions usually target couples who are already dissatisfied. A newer area of research focuses on relationship education programs, which teach skills to couples before they become dissatisfied (see Markman & Rhoades, 2012 for a review). However, those programs require an individual to be in a committed relationship, and they have the possibility of missing a subset of individuals who may lack the skills to enter a committed relationship in the first place. Thus, interventions that teach relationship skills to adolescents or emerging adults, regardless of relationship status or experience, have the possibility of reaching a wider audience and influencing the mate selection process, which may set people up to have healthier relationships. Thus, studies that elucidate skillful behavior in relationships can influence the development of such interventions and the types of skills that should be taught.

This study was novel in many ways, but it is important to recognize the limitations of this study and to discuss areas for future research, especially since the field on romantic competence is still in its infancy and a lot remains unclear. First, the study was cross-sectional, and thus, I was unable to test for longitudinal associations between competence and relationship behavior and outcomes. Longitudinal studies that examine how baseline romantic competence affects how individuals approach relationships and their outcomes are needed to understand the predictive

power of competence on relational functioning. Moreover, romantic competence is a dynamic construct, and as such, it is likely that it affects and is affected by relationship experiences. For example, given that there is an increased emphasis on romantic and sexual involvement in emerging adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007), relationship experience may play a crucial part in developing or enhancing competence. Perhaps individuals who have lower competence are less likely to engage in romantic behavior, which then denies them the opportunity to learn and practice skills, which further affects their competence level, particularly if their peers are gaining skills in the romantic arena. Our study was unable to look at this, since, inherent to our study design, all participants had some level of relationship experience. Second, although romantic competence was examined in men, our results will need to be replicated in future studies, particularly since there has only been one other study examining competence in men. In addition, our sample only included heterosexual couples. Although romantic competence is a construct that is expected to apply to all individuals and relationship types, it may be that individuals of differing sexual orientation face unique challenges that affect competence, and research with diverse samples will be necessary. Furthermore, although these skills are expected to apply to individuals across the life span, additional research with different developmental samples will be necessary.

Moreover, it will be important for future research to examine how romantic competence interacts with other individual traits, such as personality and mental health symptoms. There is extensive evidence that mental health symptoms affect intimate relationships (see Bhatia & Davila, in press for a review), and as such, it may be that differences in symptomatology affect how competence is developed and/or enacted. For example, given that depression contributes to deficits in social support skills (Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997), it may be that

adolescents who experience higher depressive symptoms have lower romantic competence, which then affects future behavior in relationships. Mental health symptoms may also interact with competence to affect behavior. For example, there is empirical evidence that depression affects social support behavior (see Wade & Kendler, 2000 for a review), and from this study, there is evidence that competence is generally associated with more adaptive support behavior. Thus, it would be interesting to examine if individuals in a depressive episode are less likely to show negative support behavior if they have higher levels of romantic competence; could romantic competence buffer the negative effects of symptomatology on relationship functioning?

This dissertation examined objectively coded social support behavior in a sample of emerging adult couples. My sample allowed me to examine the unique association between romantic competence and actual behavior with one's romantic partner, controlling for relationship satisfaction. Generally, it appears that greater romantic competence is associated with seeking and providing support in a more adaptive manner, even when the effect of relationship satisfaction on behavior is taken into account. Although this study extended the literature on romantic competence, it raises many more interesting questions for future research. The romantic relationship field is interested in reducing relationship distress and negative outcomes, and focusing on romantic competence - the skills that drive adaptive romantic decision making and behavior – may help the field understand how people can develop healthy relationships.

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Table 1

Correlations, means, and standard deviations of the RCI-EA subscales by gender

	Insight	Learning	Mutuality	Emotion Regulation	Global
Insight	.34***	.82***	.77***	.61***	.88***
Learning	.92***	.18	.72***	.69***	.87***
Mutuality	.72***	.75***	.25*	.71***	.87***
Emotion Regulation	.44***	.41***	.58***	.28**	.79***
Global	.84***	.84***	.87***		.25*
Male - <i>M (SD)</i>	3.57 (0.68)	3.60 (0.62)	3.71 (0.56)	3.47 (0.72)	3.57 (0.63)
Female - <i>M (SD)</i>	3.67 (0.58)	3.67 (0.60)	3.72 (0.64)	3.33 (0.72)	3.64 (0.58)

Notes. $N = 89$ couples. Correlations for males are above the diagonal, and correlations for females are below. Cross-partner correlations are shown on the diagonal. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

Table 2

ICC reliability scores for the RCI-EA by gender

Males		Females	
RCI-EA domain	ICC	RCI-EA domain	ICC
Insight	.89	Insight	.88
Learning	.79	Learning	.90
Mutuality	.74	Mutuality	.90
Emotion Regulation	.84	Emotion Regulation	.85
Global competence	.89	Global competence	.87

Notes. $N = 89$ couples. The ICC was calculated using a single measure, random, absolute method.

Table 3

Correlations, means, and standard deviations of SSICS codes by gender

	Providing support positively	Providing support negative	Seeking support positively	Seeking support negatively
Providing support positively	.24*	-.58***	.40***	-.28**
Providing support negative	-.44***	.15	-.15	.22*
Seeking support positively	.65***	-.31**	.08	-.66***
Seeking support negative	-.41***	.52***	-.48***	.25*
Male - <i>M (SD)</i>	2.47 (0.69)	1.08 (0.77)	2.26 (0.74)	1.39 (0.81)
Female - <i>M (SD)</i>	2.34 (0.81)	0.97 (0.83)	2.11 (0.82)	1.46 (0.85)

Notes. $N = 89$ couples. Correlations for males are above the diagonal, and correlations for females are below. Cross-partner correlations are shown on the diagonal. SSICS code range = 0 = *not at all*, 2 = *moderately*, 4 = *extremely*. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

Table 4

ICC reliability scores for the global SSICS coding scheme by gender

Males		Females	
SSICS code	ICC	SSICS code	ICC
Providing support positively	.70	Providing support positively	.73
Providing support negative	.67	Providing support negative	.68
Seeking support positively	.69	Seeking support positively	.68
Seeking support negative	.83	Seeking support negative	.77

Notes. $N = 89$ couples. The ICC was calculated using a single measure, random, absolute method.

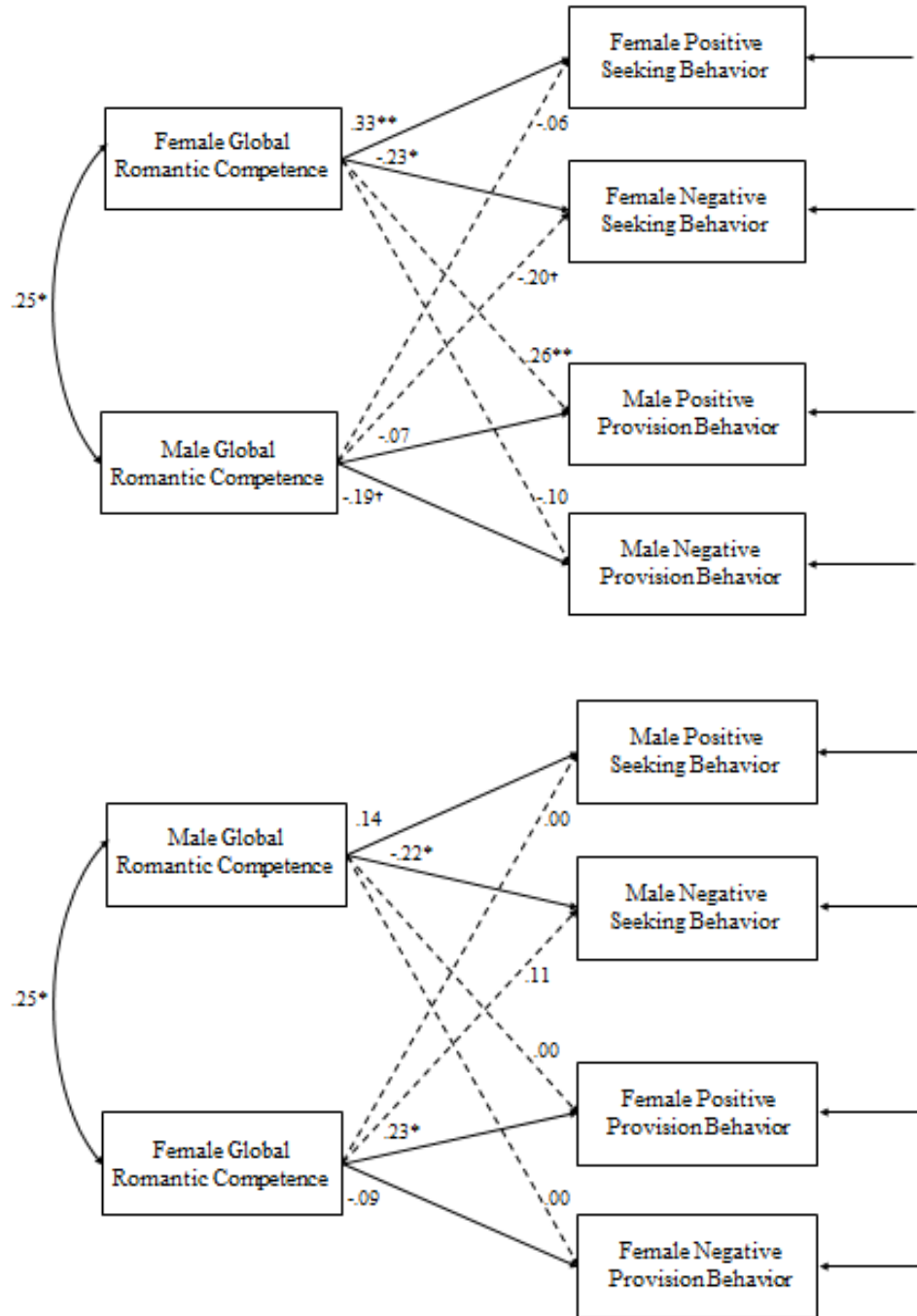


Figure 1. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between overall romantic competence and social support behavior for males and females. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are by the outcome variable; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

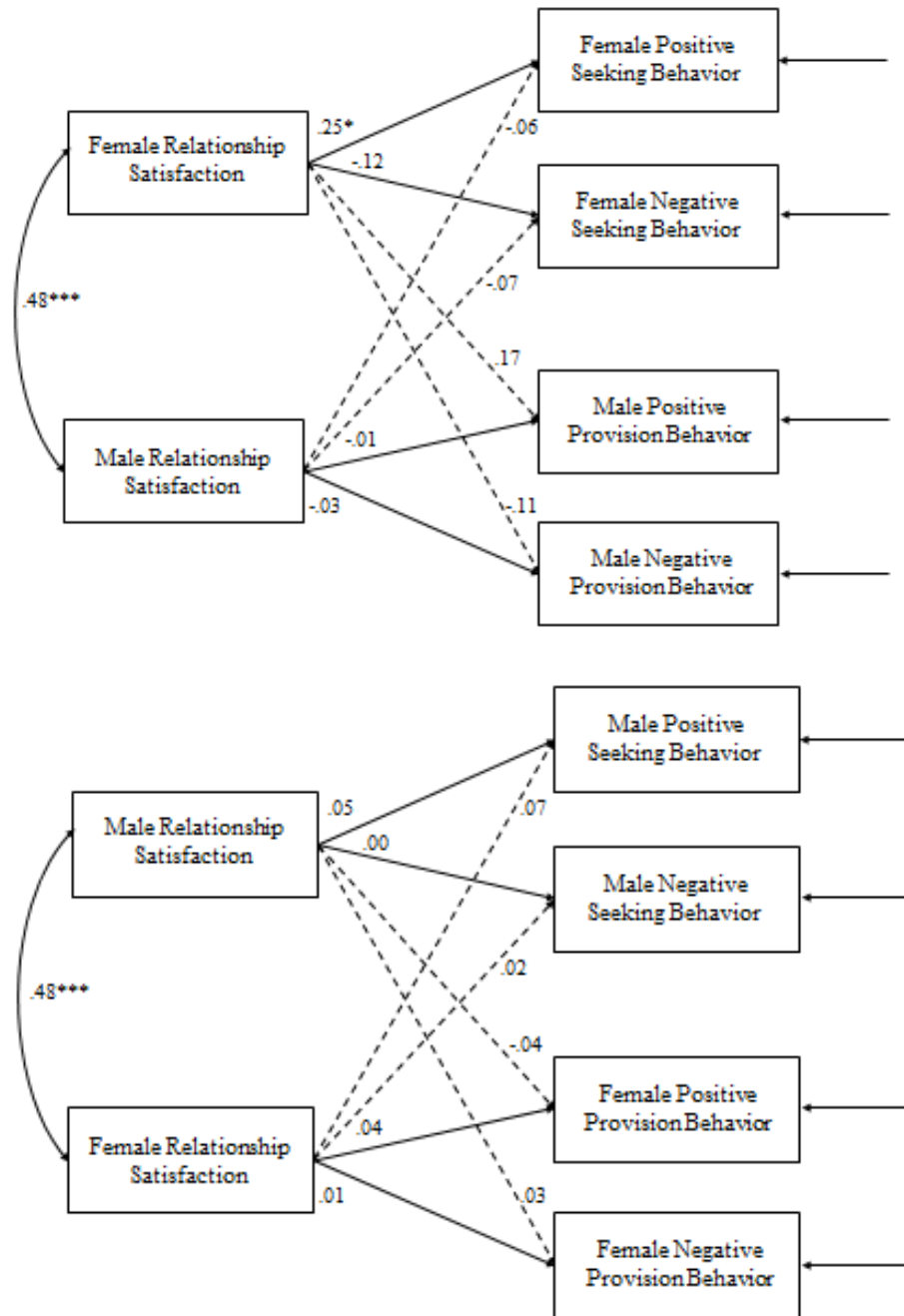


Figure 2. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between relationship satisfaction and social support behavior for males and females. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

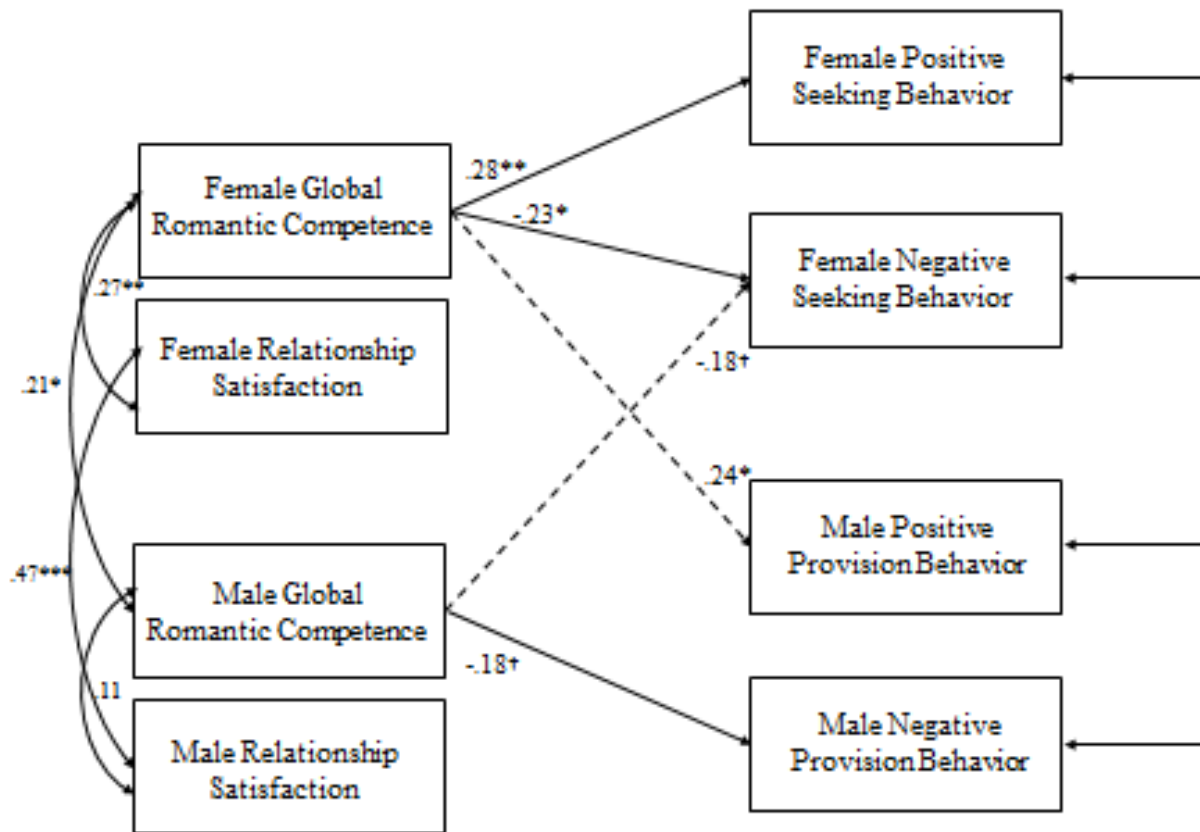


Figure 3. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between overall romantic competence and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the female task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † $.05 < p < .10$.

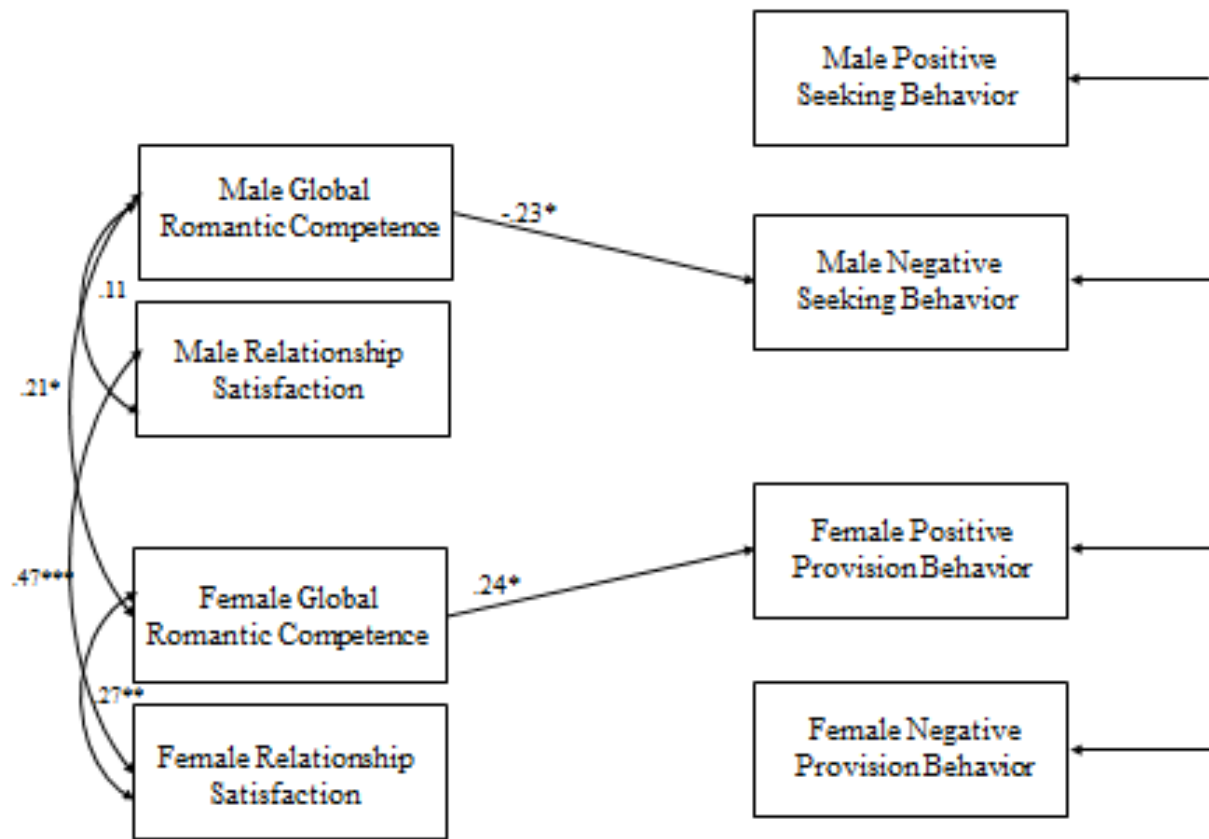


Figure 4. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between overall romantic competence and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the male task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † $.05 < p < .10$.

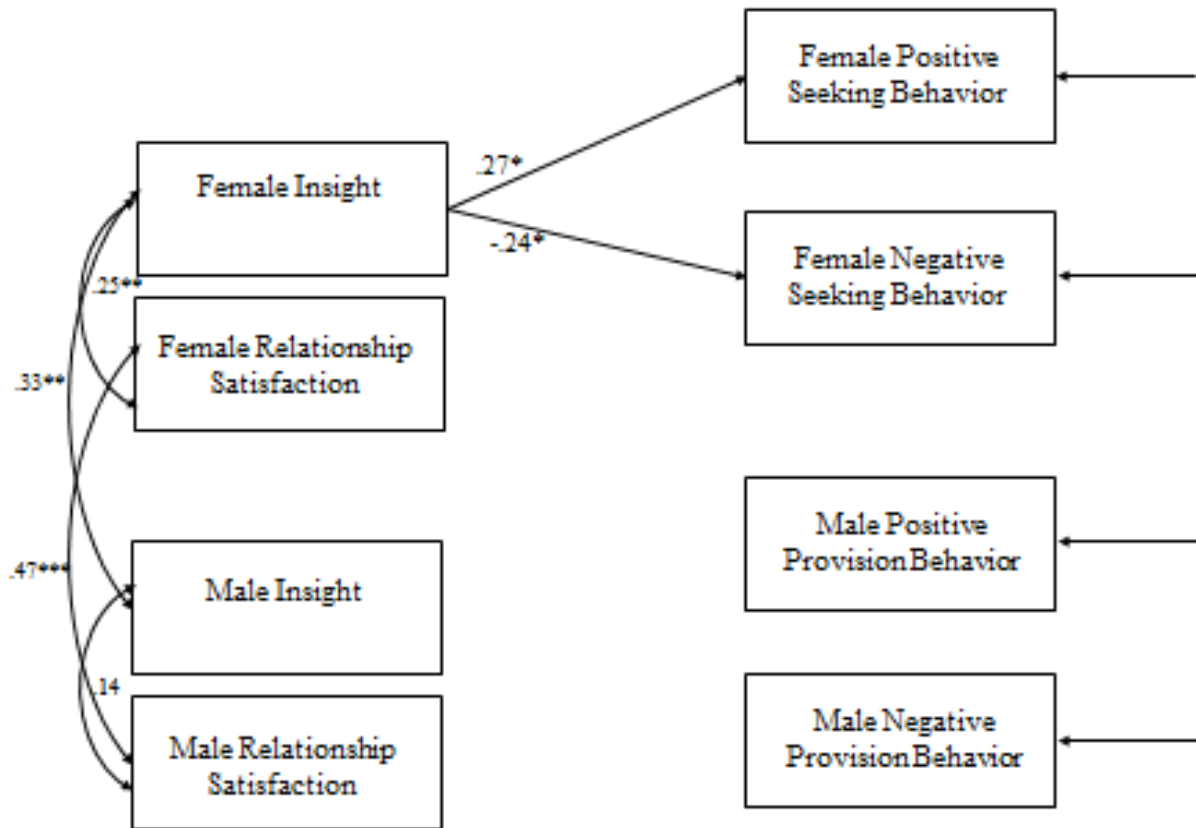


Figure 5. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between the RCI-EA insight domain and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the female task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † $.05 < p < .10$.

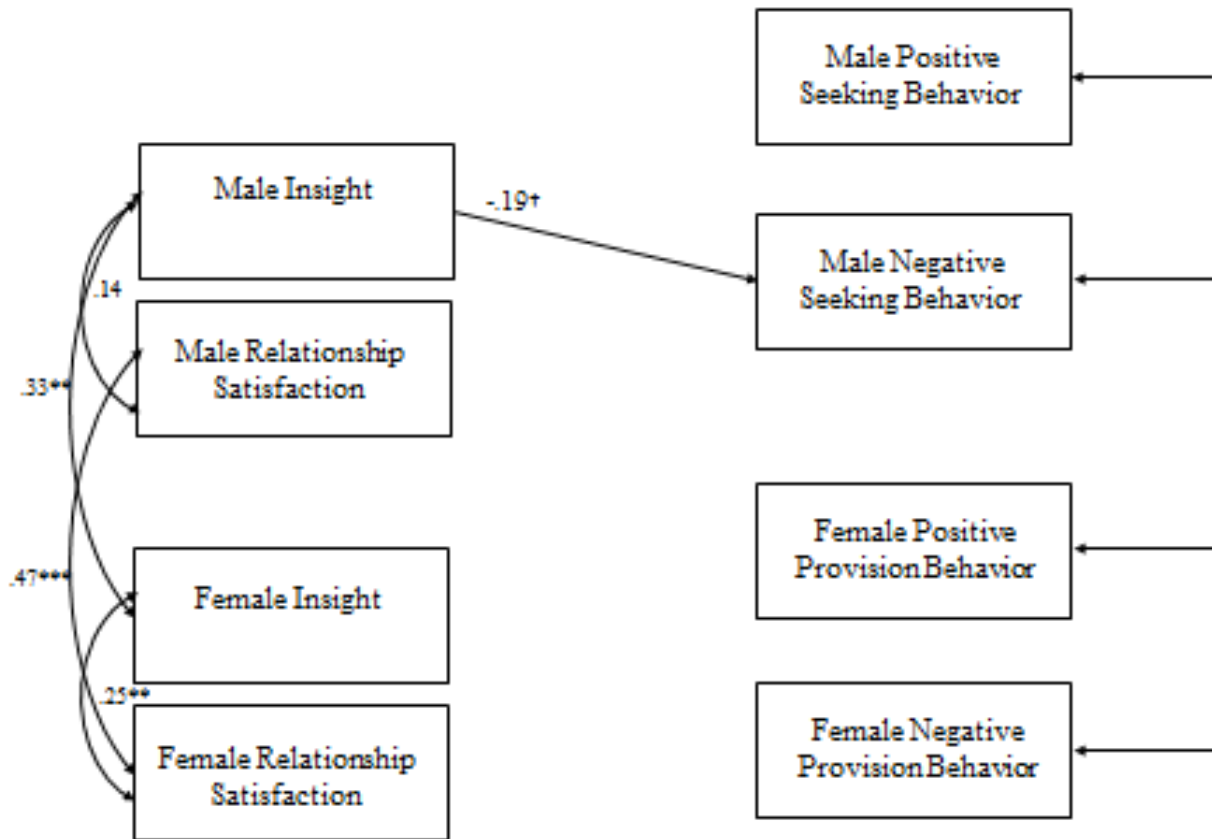


Figure 6. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between the RCI-EA insight domain and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the male task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, $\dagger .05 < p < .10$.

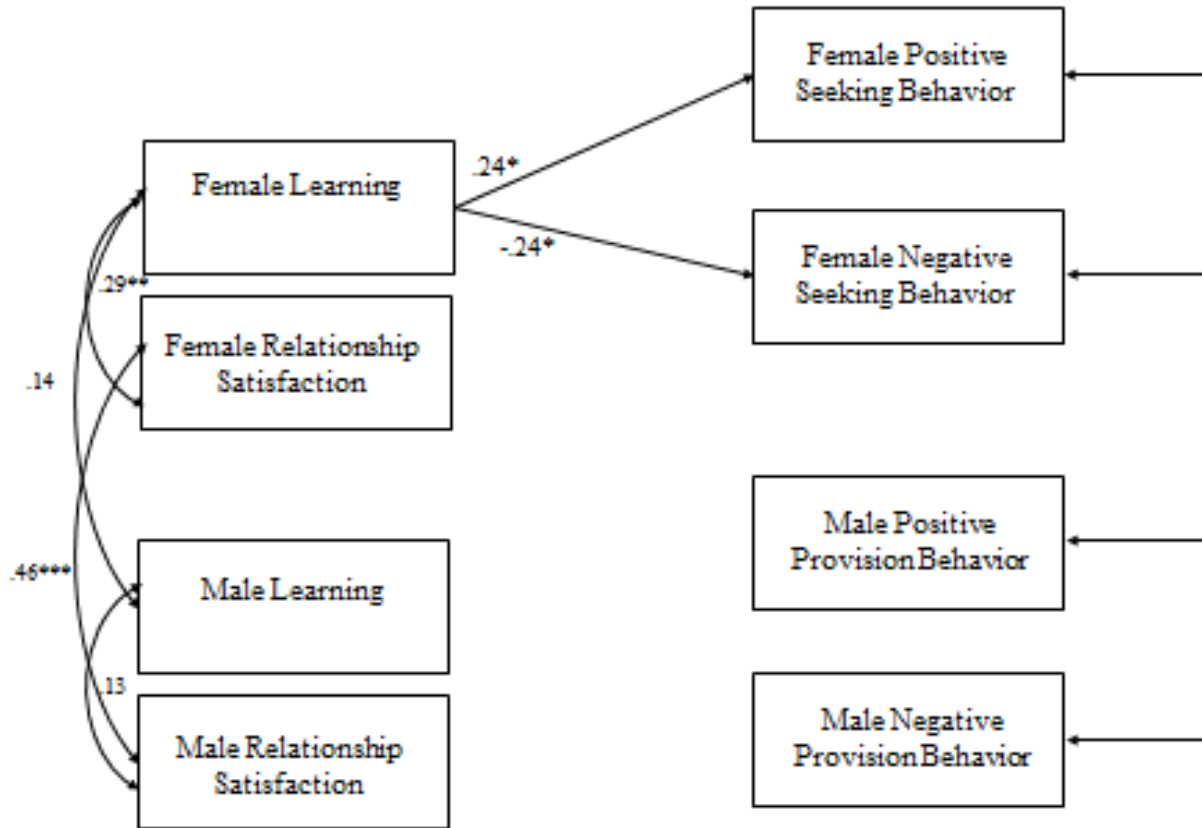


Figure 7. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between the RCI-EA learning domain and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the female task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † $.05 < p < .10$.

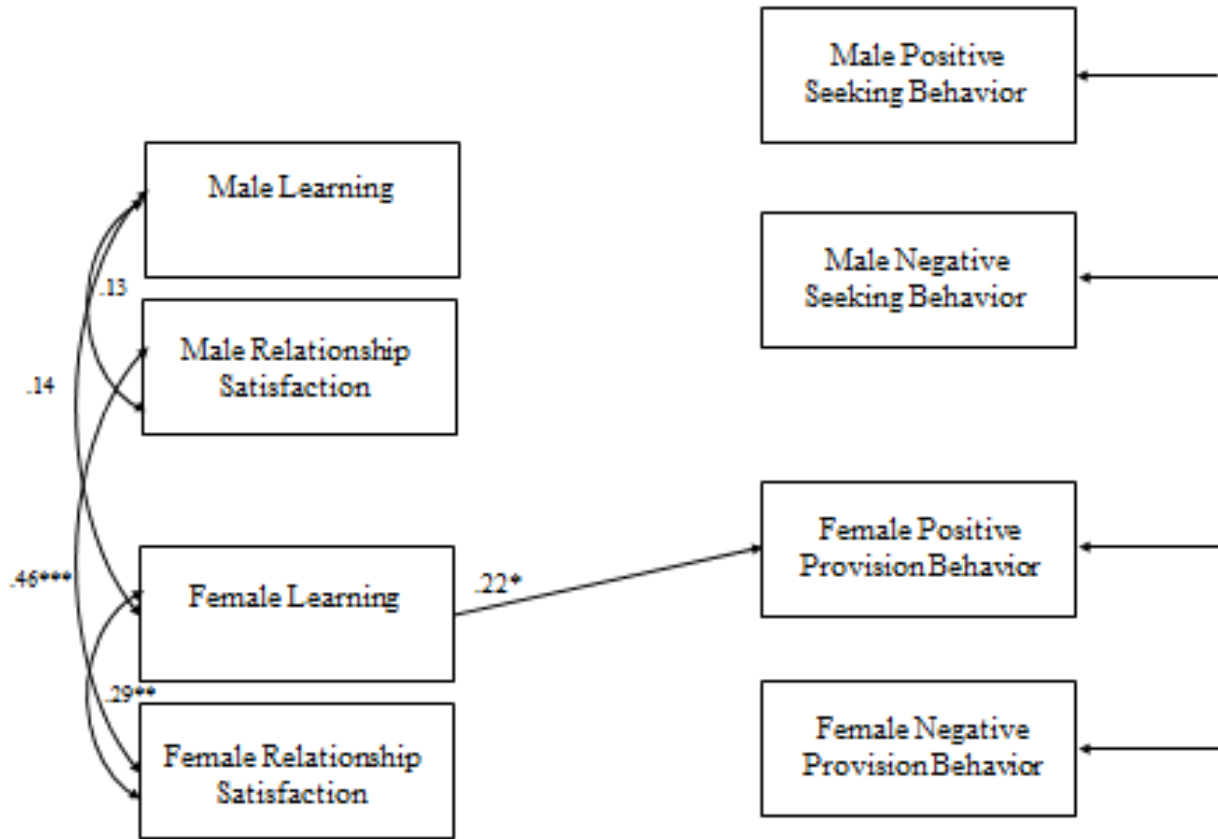


Figure 8. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between the RCI-EA learning domain and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the male task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † $.05 < p < .10$.

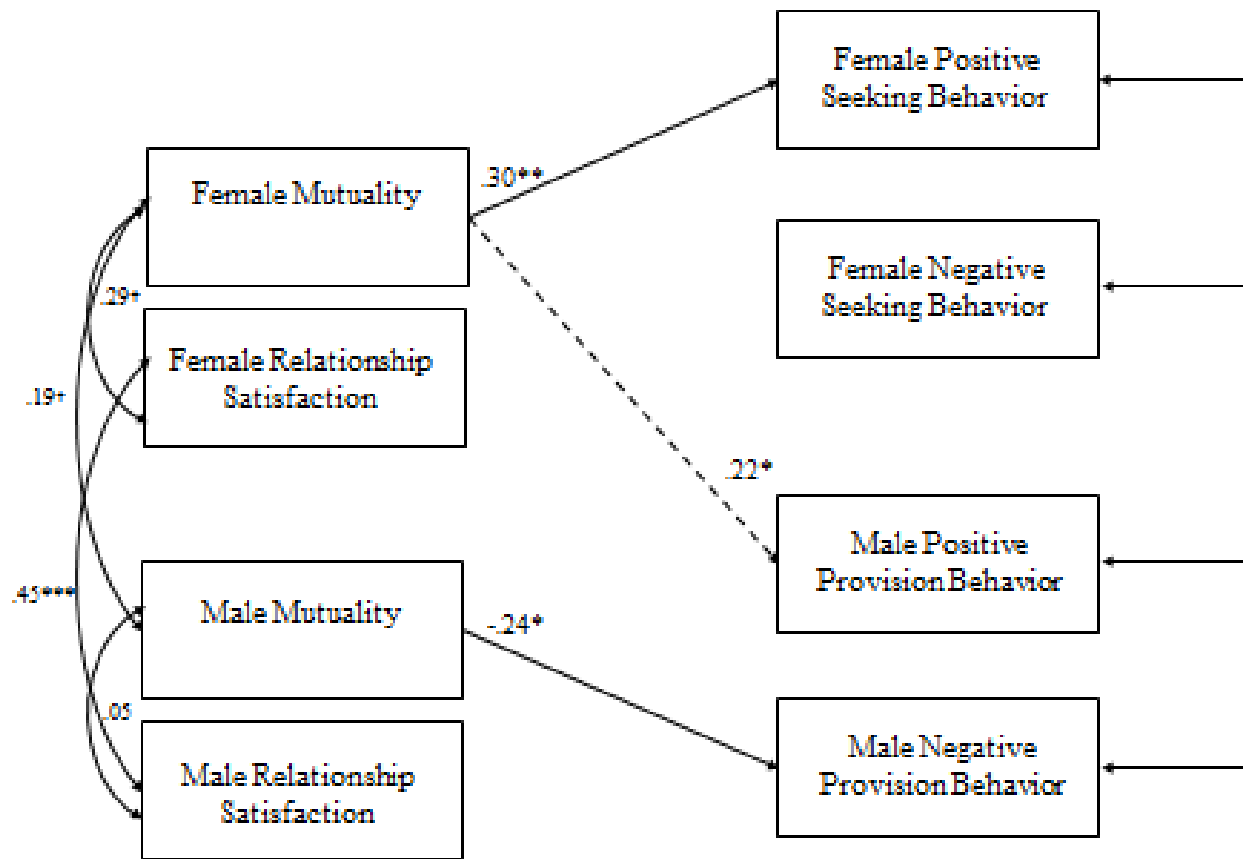


Figure 9. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between the RCI-EA mutuality domain and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the female task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † $.05 < p < .10$.

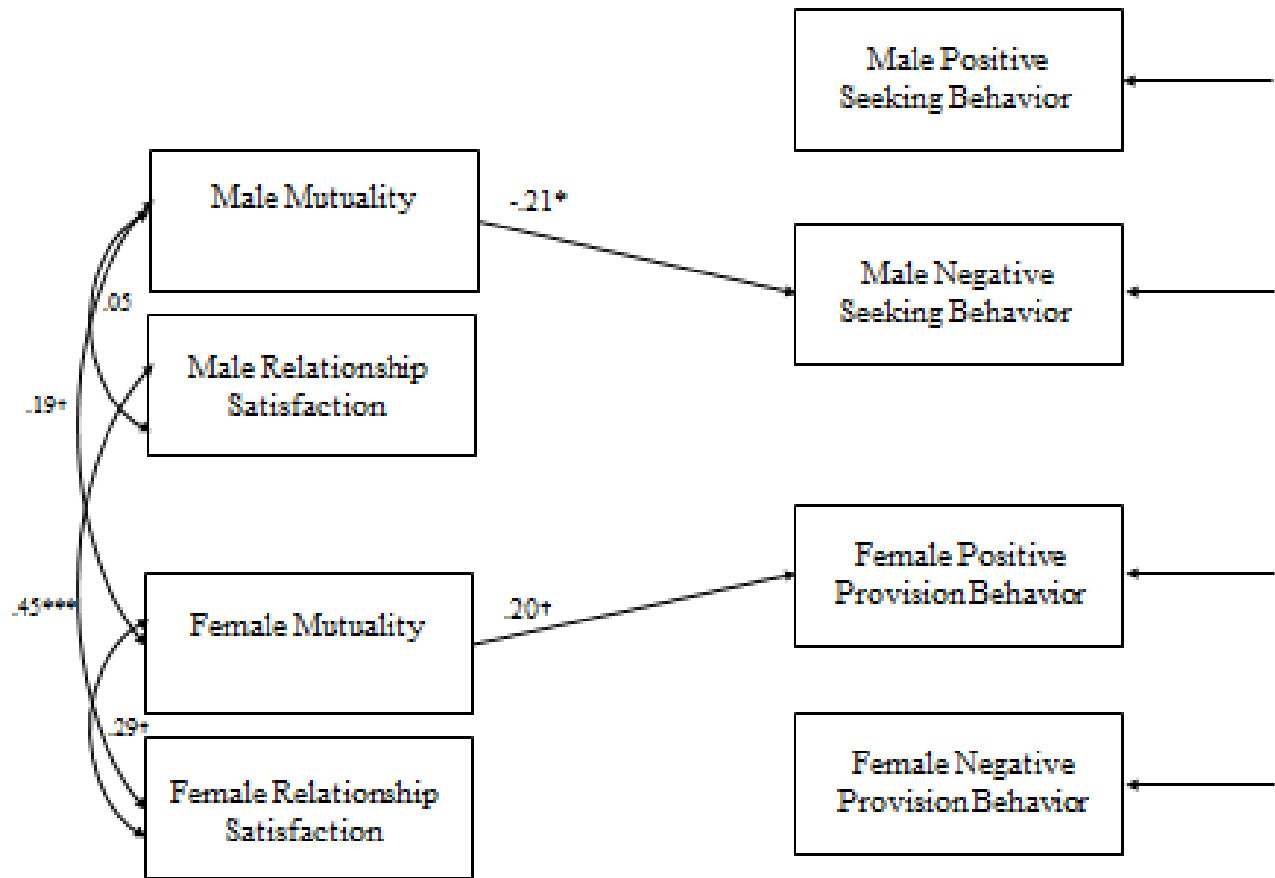


Figure 10. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between the RCI-EA mutuality domain and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the male task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, $†.05 < p < .10$.

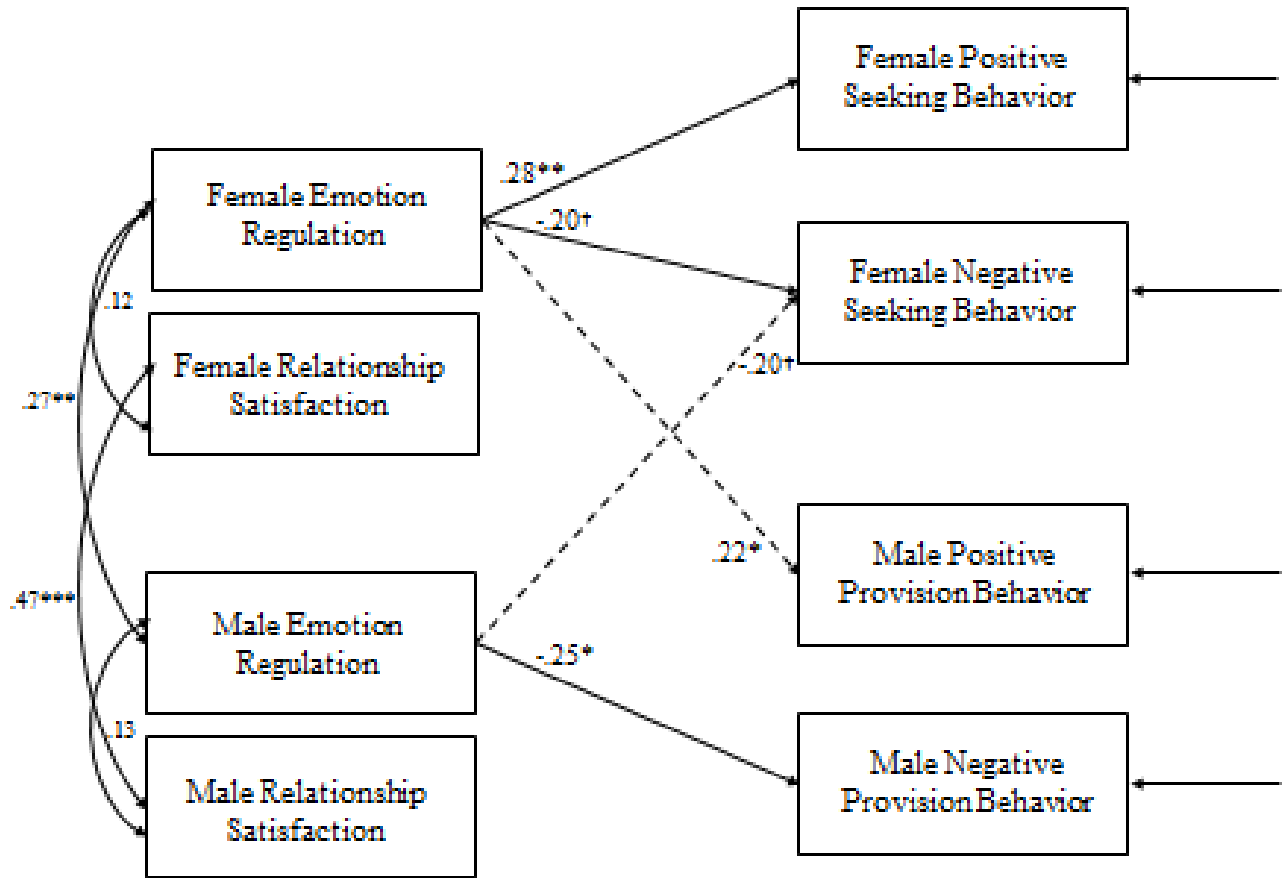


Figure 11. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between the RCI-EA emotion regulation domain and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the female task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, †.05 < $p < .10$.

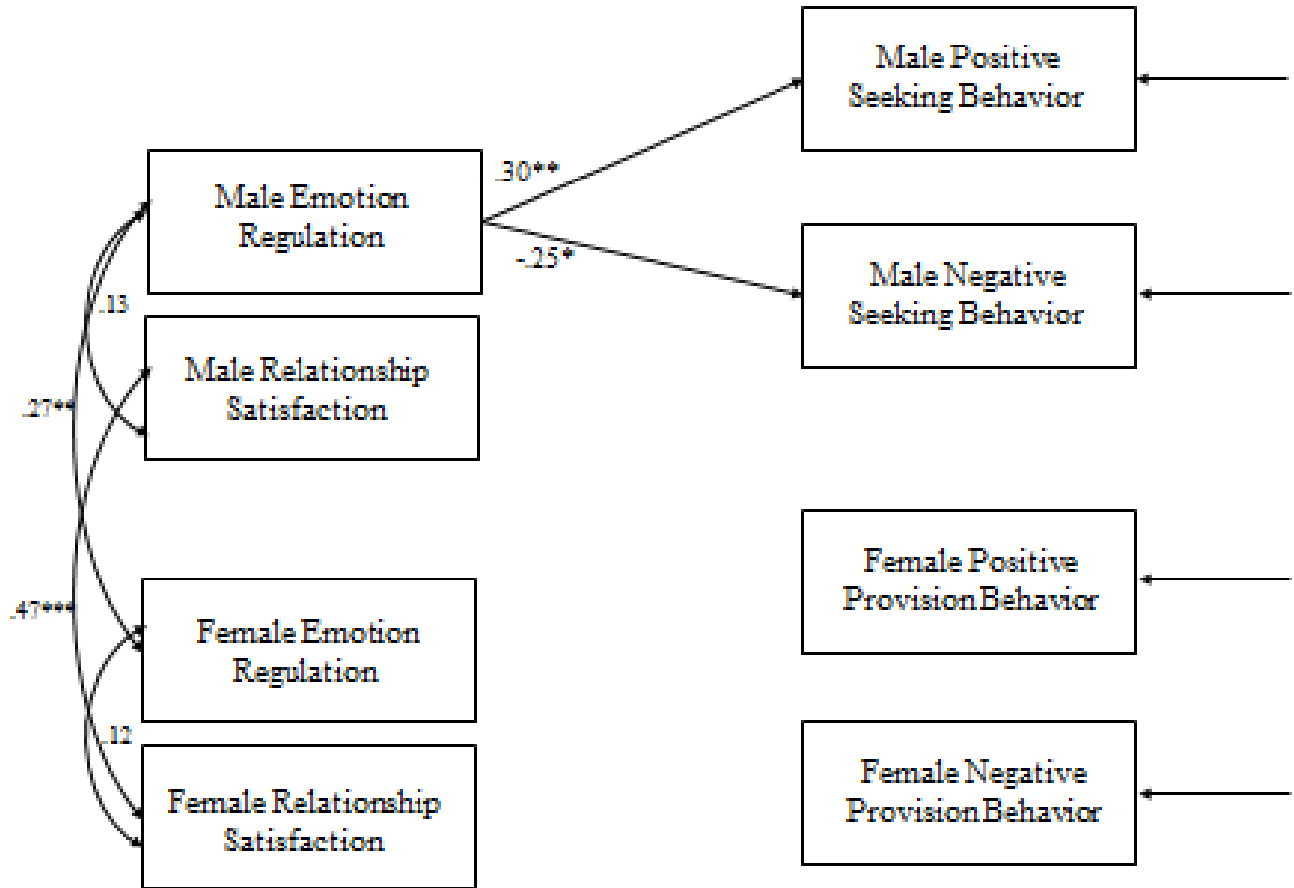


Figure 12. Actor-partner interdependence model for the association between the RCI-EA emotion regulation domain competence and social support behavior (controlling for relationship satisfaction) during the male task. Actor effects are marked with solid lines and their values are given by the predictor variable; partner effects are marked with dashed lines and their values are given by the outcome variable. Only significant pathways are shown; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † $.05 < p < .10$.

Appendix A

Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-16; Funk & Rogge, 2007)

1. Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A Little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy	Perfect

Most people have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

	All the time	Most of the time	More often than not	Occa- sionally	Rarely	Never
2. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?	5	4	3	2	1	0
	Not at all true	A little true	Some- what true	Mostly true	Almost Completely true	Completely true
3. Our relationship is strong	0	1	2	3	4	5
4. My relationship with my partner makes me happy	0	1	2	3	4	5
5. I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5
6. I really feel like part of a team with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5
	Not at all	A little	Some- what	Mostly	Almost Completely	Completely
7. How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?	0	1	2	3	4	5
8. How well does your partner meet your needs?	0	1	2	3	4	5

9. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations? 0 1 2 3 4 5
10. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship? 0 1 2 3 4 5

For each of the following items, select the answer that best describes *how you feel about your relationship*. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item.

- | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|--------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 11. | Interesting | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | Boring |
| 12. | Bad | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Good |
| 13. | Full | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | Empty |
| 14. | Sturdy | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | Fragile |
| 15. | Discouraging | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Hopeful |
| 16. | Enjoyable | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | Miserable |

Appendix B

Romantic Competence Interview – Emerging Adult, Current Relationship version

(Davila et al., 2009, 2015)

I'd like to ask you some questions now about romantic relationships, dating... those kinds of things. For simplicity, I'm going to use that kind of terminology, but what I really mean is any kind of romantic or sexual interaction with someone. Do you know what I mean?

I'd like for us to focus on the last 6 months. So that would be since _____. So, think about that time frame. I'm going to be asking you about different experiences you may have had, how you think and feel about romantic types of things, what you think you might do or what you have done in certain situations... things like that.

Let me begin by asking what do you consider your sexual orientation or preference to be? (let them respond) _____ straight _____ gay _____ bisexual _____ unsure/questioning

Also, can you give me a brief idea of how much experience you've had in romantic relationships?

OK, now I'd like to get a sense of what's been going on in the past 6 months for you.

What would you say your relationship status is right now? (let them respond, then narrow it down; they may fall into multiple categories; for each get first names, length of relationship(s), and how serious each is)

_____ in a serious exclusive relationship

_____ in a serious non-exclusive relationship

_____ dating someone (not seriously)

_____ dating a number of different people

_____ engaging in a sexual relationship with one person (but not considered a romantic relationship)

_____ engaging in sexual relationships with multiple people (but not considered romantic relationships)

_____ not involved romantically or sexually with anyone

OK, now I want to get a sense of the entire past 6 months. Have you been _____ (fill in from above) for the past 6 months? If no, get history, narrow it down using the categories above, and probe accordingly.

_____ in a serious exclusive relationship

_____ in a serious non-exclusive relationship

_____ dating someone (not seriously)

_____ dating a number of different people

_____ engaging in a sexual relationship with one person (but not considered a romantic relationship)

_____ engaging in sexual relationships with multiple people (but not considered romantic relationships)

_____ not involved romantically or sexually with anyone

OK, I think I have a good sense of what's been going on for you. It sounds like... (summarize).

A little later on I'm going to ask you more about what you told me, but right now I'd like to ask you some general questions about the kinds of people you like.

First, what kind of people do you hang out with? What group are you in? (e.g., jocks, etc.). What are your friends like (what do they like to do)?

When you/if you were going to get involved with someone, do/would you ever go out with anyone outside of your group or do/would you only get involved with someone who is one of your friends? Why?

When you/if you were going to get involved with someone, what kind of person do/would you like to be with? What do/would they look like, act like, etc...?

Do you ever meet people that you feel interested in/attracted to (in person or online) – that you would want to be involved with? What happens? What do you think/feel/do?

Do you ever have crushes on anyone (in person or online)? Who? What's that like? What do you do?

What are your ideas about what makes a good romantic relationship?

What are your ideas about what makes a bad romantic relationship?

What are your ideas about what makes a good marriage?

What are your ideas about what makes a bad marriage?

Are your parents married?

If yes: what is your parents' marriage like? If you get married someday, how would you want your marriage to be different from your parents' marriage?

If no: is either of your parents in a relationship? If yes, how would you want a relationship of yours to be different from that of the one your parent is in?

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about what you might do and think and feel in different situations, all relating to romantic or sexual types of involvements. If you've been in these situations you can base your answer on that experience. If you've never been in a situation that I ask about, then just think about what you would do if you were in that situation.

What would you do/think/feel if...(probe with why and how come; make sure to probe emotion regulation – i.e., How would you (did you) cope with that?)

Someone was interested in you and you liked him/her?

Someone was interested in you and you didn't like him/her?

You were involved with someone and you really liked him/her and you wanted him/her to know that?

You were involved with someone and he/she betrayed your trust in some way (e.g., cheated on you or flirted with someone else; told someone else something personal/private about you or spread rumors about you; didn't respond to your efforts for contact or ignored you?)

You were involved with someone and you were unhappy about how it was going?

You were involved with someone and you wanted to be exclusive but he/she didn't?

You were involved with someone and you didn't want to be exclusive?

You were involved with someone and you wanted to end it or break up?

The person you were involved with ended it or broke up with you?

What would you say is the worst situation you've ever found yourself in with regards to dealing with a partner or a difficult romantic or sexual situation? How did you handle it?

In general, how important is it to you to be involved with someone? Why?

In the long term, how important would it be to you to be in a romantic relationship? What do you see in your future?

Do you ever worry about not finding someone to be with/date? What about that worries you?

What do you think you would miss by not dating or being in a relationship?

What do you think you would gain by not dating or being in a relationship?

If you were involved with someone, how would you decide how far to go sexually? Do you ever feel pressure to do more than you might want to? Pressure from who?

Thinking about where you have learned about dating/guys/girls/romantic relationships, who/where have you learned the most from? What have you learned? Who/where do you prefer to go to learn about romantic relationships?

OK, now I'd like to go back to where we began and ask you more about your experiences. You said that in the past 6 months you... (summarize again). I'm going to ask you about that now.

Interview for participants who are currently or have been in the past 6 months involved with someone in any way that resembles a relationship (defined as such by them or by the interviewer):

**** Note: Use past tense for past relationships. And make sure to use the participants' language throughout! ****

You said that you are/were involved with... [Write name of person here _____]

How did you get together/become involved? (get the **brief** version of the story).

When you met _____, what did you think of him/her? What first attracted you to _____? Why did you want to get involved with/date him/her?

Can you tell me a little about what _____ is like? What are some of the good things/things you like about being involved with him/her? What are some of the not so good things/things you don't like?

If necessary: What do you like most about being involved with _____? What don't you like?

What do you think _____ likes most about you? And least?

If necessary: What would they say? How do you know?

How do/did you get along with _____?

How do/did _____ treat you?

Do/did you ever have conflicts or disagreements? Why/why not? How were those handled?

Did they get resolved? How/why not?

How is/was your communication? Were/are you on the same page with what you both wanted? Were/are you equally invested? Are/were you both getting what you wanted?

Did you ever break up (past 6 months)? When? Why? What happened? Who broke up with who? How did it go? What was it like for you? How did you (did you) cope with that?

Had/have you ever thought about breaking up? When? Why?

If yes, tell me your thoughts about it.

How much do you worry about whether you will stay involved?

How difficult would it be for you if you broke up? How would you (did you) cope with that?

If necessary: Have you ever had regrets or doubts about dating/going out with _____?

Thinking about your involvement, is there anything you would do (would have done) differently if you could do it again?

What have you learned from this involvement? [If necessary – about yourself, or other people, or about what relationships are like.]

RCI-EA Subscale Coding examples:

Insight

- *Low*: Shows no insight into the negative effects of behavior; blames others for own mistakes; in a relationship because of peer pressure/social expectations; cannot generate reasons (e.g., own needs/wants) as to why in a relationship.
- *High*: Able to reflect on self and others; insight into self and others' motives; able to describe ways in which current relationship or behavior or thoughts related to romantic relationships is different (improved) from the past.

Learning

- *Low*: Shows no evidence of learning following a break-up or negative event (repeats same negative pattern in second relationship/involvement or reports hypothetically would not change response); repetition of past behavior with undesired consequences; no or minimal demonstrated learning or effort to learn.
- *High*: Coherently describes what was learned from past romantic problems, or from friends' involvements or parents' marriage; uses past relationship experiences to alter behavior in a second experience/involvement following a break-up/negative event.

Mutuality

- *Low*: Does what partner wants to make him/her happy while consistently ignoring own wants and needs; minimizes or doesn't take partner's wants/needs into consideration.
- *High*: Shows empathy for partners' wants and negotiates mutually satisfactory solutions; describes relationship as involving doing things for each other, mutual respect, etc.

Emotion regulation

- *Low*: Has emotional outbursts (e.g., screaming, yelling, crying) towards partner when unhappy; uses maladaptive coping mechanisms (rumination, avoidance, substances) in response to relationship problems.
- *High*: Able to put relationship events into perspective as opposed to seeing all as dramatic; uses coping strategies to regulate emotions following break-up or can give a plan of coping for negative events if hypothetical.

Scale for the Global Code:

5 – Significant evidence of competence – participant exhibits high levels of competence in all domains – e.g., shows evidence of insight, mutuality, learning, consequential thinking when thinking about relationships; decision making about relationships that results in desired outcomes while maintaining care and respect of self and others; has good emotion regulation skills with regard to relationships; can tolerate non-desired relational outcomes; maintains self-esteem with regard to relationships; can balance individuality and closeness in relationships.

4 – Generally good evidence of competence – participant exhibits competence in most domains, may have the occasional lapse in competence.

3 – Moderate evidence of competence – participant exhibits some competent behavior, but not consistently or completely adequately – may be aware of competent behavior, but cannot always accomplish it.

2 – Weak evidence of competence – participant exhibits relatively little evidence of competent behavior or knowledge – significantly more incompetence is exhibited compared to competence – may be aware of some aspects of competence, but cannot accomplish it.

1 – No evidence of competence – participant does not exhibit any evidence of competent behavior in any domain – no awareness of competent behavior exists – e.g., low insight, low mutuality, failure to learn, poor consequential thinking; decisions that result in compromise of respect of self or other; poor emotion regulation with regard to relationships; inability to tolerate non-desired outcomes; compromises self-esteem in relationships; poor balance of individuality and closeness.

Appendix C

Modified Global Social Support Interaction Coding System (SSICS)

Providing social support codes

Positive Behaviors

Instrumental – behaviors such as making specific suggestions, giving helpful advice, offering to assist in the development or enactment of a plan of action, giving constructive feedback

Emotional – behaviors such as reassuring, consoling, providing genuine encouragement, conveying that the helpee is loved, cared for, or esteemed, and clarifying feelings

Physical – behaviors related to physical affection or comfort, such as moving physically closer to the helpee

Other Positive– all positive behaviors that do not fall specifically into the other categories, including general analysis of the problem, summarizing, and encouraging continued discussion, appropriate use of humor, and positive comments about the process of discussing the topic

Negative Behaviors

Negative – behaviors such as criticizing or blaming the helpee, offering inconsiderate advice, being sarcastic or insulting, minimizing or exaggerating the scope of the problem/task, being inattentive or disengaged, talking about self, acting defensively, and insisting the helpee employ his/her approach to the problem

Off-task – behaviors not relevant to the problem under consideration

Seeking social support codes

Positive Behaviors

Positive – behaviors such as offering a specific, clear analysis of the problem, expressing appropriate feelings related to the problem, asking for help or stating needs in a useful way, responding positively to helper questions or suggestions, expressing affection towards partner, and using appropriate humor

Negative Behaviors

Negative – behaviors such as making demands for help, criticizing or accusing the helper, whining or complaining, rejecting assistance from the helper, excessive reassurance seeking, expressing negative affect towards the helper, and acting defensively