Are Peer Status, Friendship Quality, and Friendship Stability Equivalent Markers of Social Competence?

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Received: 30 June 2016 / Accepted: 14 September 2016 / Published online: 21 September 2016
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Abstract The definition of social competence is much debated among researchers. It is common to assess social competence based on relational outcomes, instead of individual traits, as it is believed that social competence underlies an individual's success in achieving these outcomes. Common indicators of social competence among adolescents include peer group status, friendship quality, and friendship stability. Researchers have recently paid increased attention to the different social skills needed to attain different forms of peer status (i.e., peer acceptance vs. popularity), but a similar level of attention has not been paid to the distinction between social skills needed for peer status compared with friendship success. In the current review, we call for increased attention to this distinction. In addition, we argue that social competence should be viewed in light of adolescents' personal social goals (e.g., whether they prioritize status over friendships), and their ability to effectively attain those goals. Finally, we argue that whereas friendship quality is a good marker of social competence, friendship stability is a poor marker of social competence because ending a friendship may actually be an indicator of social savvy in some instances.

Keywords Social competence · Popularity · Peer acceptance · Friendship quality · Friendship stability · Social goals

Introduction

Peer relationships have significant impacts on adolescents' social-emotional development (Rubin et al. 2011; Schneider 2016). Because successful peer relationships require social skills, such as person perception, empathy, and prosocial behavior (Cillessen and Bellmore 2011; Vetter et al. 2013), they are therefore presumed to signify adolescents' social competence. Ford (1982) theorized that by defining social competence based on observable behavioral outcomes, as opposed to hypothetical constructs, trait-like descriptions can be avoided, and instead the focus can be on efficacy in social situations. Based on this theory, studies commonly use one of three aspects of peer relations as indicators of social competence: peer status, friendship quality, and friendship stability (Buhrmester 1990; Cillessen and Bellmore 2011; Kaeppeler and Erath 2016; Monahan and Steinberg 2011; Rew et al. 2015; Rose-Krasnor 1997).

In the current review, we critically evaluate the use of peer status, friendship quality, and friendship stability as indicators of social competence. First, we note that although recent work has contrasted the types of social skills needed to achieve different forms of peer status (i.e., likeability vs. popularity; Wargo Aikins and Litwack 2011; Cillessen and Rose 2005), less attention has been paid to the distinction between peer group competence and friendship competence. We separately consider peer group functioning and friendship functioning as distinct markers of social competence and advocate for increased attention to this distinction. Second, guided by theoretical perspectives that define social competence as the ability to attain social goals (Duck 1989; Ford 1982), we also take into account that adolescents differ in the social goals to which they aspire, such that peer status goals and friendship goals

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may be differentially prioritized across individuals. Therefore, we argue that adolescents' social goals and their ability to achieve those goals should be considered in research using peer status and/or friendship as markers of social competence. Finally, we argue that whereas friendship *quality* is an appropriate indicator of social competence, friendship *stability* is a poor marker of social competence as ending a friendship may reflect either low social competence or, alternatively, social savvy in recognizing the need to end an unhealthy friendship.

Peer Status as a Marker of Social Competence

In line with Ford's (1982) theory which characterizes social competence as observable behavioral outcomes, peer relations researchers have assessed peer status as a relational outcome indicative of social competence. Peer status is defined as a rank order of who in a set of peers is liked the most or seen as the most popular, and is based on a hierarchy agreed upon by members of the peer group (Cillessen and Bellmore 2011). An important distinction is made between two types of peer status: peer acceptance and popularity. Peer acceptance refers to likeability among peers; youth who are accepted are well-liked and are the people with whom most peers want to spend time (Bukowski et al. 1993; LaFontana and Cillessen 1999). In contrast, popular youth are socially prominent, seen as "cool," and emulated, but are not necessarily well-liked (LaFontana and Cillessen 1999; Parkhurst and Hopmeyer 1998). Both forms of peer status are typically assessed using sociometric data collection techniques in which peers nominate those people in their class or school whom they consider the most popular, the least popular, and whom they like and dislike the most (Coie et al. 1982; LaFontana and Cillessen 1999). These techniques are considered the "gold standard" method of measuring peer status (Allen et al. 2005, p. 747), and are still widely used (e.g., Pouwels et al. 2016).

Researchers have become increasingly mindful of the distinct set of social skills implicated in achieving and maintaining peer acceptance compared with popularity (Cillessen and Bellmore 2011; Cillessen and Rose 2005; Wargo Aikins and Litwack 2011). For those high status youth who are genuinely well-liked and admired by their peers, prosocial behaviors such as cooperation and helping are integral in their success in achieving high status (Cillessen and Rose 2005; Wargo Aikins and Litwack 2011). Additional behaviors that are relevant to achieving peer acceptance include taking the perspective of others, and skill in initiating contact with others or introducing oneself (Wargo Aikins and Litwack 2011). Highly accepted adolescents also tend to be described as affiliative or friendly

(Cillessen and Rose 2005), are accurate perceivers of their own and others' social skills (Cillessen and Bellmore 2011), and are skilled in handling conflict such that they rarely resort to hostile strategies, including both verbal and physical aggression, and are more likely to utilize prosocial strategies such as compromise (Cillessen and Rose 2005; Rose and Asher 1999).

In contrast, those high status youth who are perceived as popular demonstrate a balanced use of prosociality and aggression to achieve and maintain their status (e.g., Cillessen and Rose 2005; Hawley 2003; Puckett et al. 2008; Rose et al. 2004). In particular, popular youth are especially likely to engage in covert, manipulative aggression referred to as relational or social aggression (e.g., Rose et al. 2004). This type of aggression involves behaviors such as spreading rumors or excluding others (Crick 1996). Hawley (2003) has suggested that adeptly balancing prosociality and aggression, and knowing when and how to effectively use social aggression as a way to rise to the top of a hierarchy, requires skill in social perceptiveness and perspective-taking. Popular adolescents also have been found to be more aware of the behaviors that will gain approval than are less popular peers, and to accordingly modify their behaviors over time to gain peer approval (Mayeux et al. 2008; Puckett et al. 2008). According to the longitudinal, multi-method study conducted by Allen et al. (2005), such skillful modification of behavior is indicative of social savvy but also can prove to be risky, as popular youth modified their behavior in line with both positive peer expectations (i.e., behaving less hostile toward other peers), and negative peer expectations (i.e., increasing levels of minor drug use and deviant behavior).

Researchers also have noted a distinction between well-liked youth compared with popular youth in terms of the methods they use to enter peer groups. Specifically, well-liked adolescents are more likely to be patient, take their time to gauge the goals or activities of a group, and are deferential or considerate in their attempts to join groups, leading to a smooth entry into the group (Wargo Aikins and Litwack 2011). Perceived popular youth, in contrast, are more likely to disrupt the current activities of a group upon entry, and tend to draw more attention to themselves as they enter (Wargo Aikins and Litwack 2011). This observation demonstrates that while there is some overlap in the skills needed for both types of high status youth, such as joining groups, the specific behaviors or methods used may differ.

The distinction between well-liked and perceived popular youth is not only important to researchers, but also to adolescents themselves. An interesting study by de Bruyn and Cillessen (2006), which asked adolescents open-ended questions in order to gather insight on their perceptions of the popular peers at their school, indicated that adolescents

perceive and articulate notable distinctions between well-liked peers compared with popular peers. While adolescents attributed all high status youth with being attractive in appearance and “hip” in their clothing choices, popular peers were more often described as having vulgar appearances (i.e., inappropriate dress, or wearing excessive amounts of make-up), whereas well-liked youth were viewed as having typical appearances. Popular peers were more often described as being antisocial (i.e., engaging in fights), arrogant, and showing off, but were also seen as leaders and influential in the peer group more so than well-liked youth. Well-liked youth, on the other hand, were described as sociable (i.e., friendly, helpful, caring) and more academically engaged than the popular youth. Thus, the distinction between peer acceptance and popularity is one that is readily made by adolescents and researchers alike.

As alluded to in this past study, some predictors of popularity are not necessarily indicative of social competence. For example, Vannatta et al. (2009) demonstrated that traits such as physical attractiveness, athletic ability, and academic competence were all significantly related to the attainment of popularity, but none of these were representative of the adolescent’s social competence. Instead, these are simply attributes that adolescents may possess that likely affect the ease or difficulty with which they are able to achieve their social goals. In fact, it may be argued that an adolescent who is less physically attractive, has lower athletic ability, or performs poorly in academics would be considered to have especially superior social competence if he or she was nevertheless able to achieve popularity in spite of these limitations.

Overall, the distinct aspects of social competence needed to achieve and maintain acceptance compared with popularity have received increased attention in recent decades. However, the distinction between friendships and peer status as unique markers of social competence has received less attention. We turn now to this distinction.

Friendship as a Marker of Social Competence Distinct from Peer Status

Friendships are close relationships that are distinct from relations with others in the peer group more broadly (Parker and Asher 1993). Although friendship and peer status are correlated, owing in part to the fact that youth of high peer status have more access to potential friends (Bukowski et al. 1996; Thomas and Bowker 2013), they also are distinct. Whereas friendships are dyadic relationships that involve mutual feelings of positive regard and affection, peer status is a composite of unilateral feelings or perceptions about an individual from across the entire peer

group (Bagwell and Schmidt 2013). While much attention has been paid to the social skills demonstrated by high status youth, researchers are also interested in the skills required to make and keep friends in adolescence, especially considering that high positive quality friendships have been associated with many positive adjustment outcomes for adolescents (Bukowski et al. 1993; Schmidt and Bagwell 2007; Schneider 2016).

Due to the importance of friendships, many researchers have assessed the various qualities that constitute positive, high quality friendships in adolescence, and the skills that are required for adolescents to both form and maintain these friendships. Berndt (1982), for instance, discussed four features of friendships that have received considerable attention in the literature and that point to the skills needed for close friendships. These features include: intimate conversations that result in both partners acquiring extensive knowledge of the other, responsiveness to the other’s needs, similarity among the friends, and stability of the friendship over time. Other qualities apparent in good friendships were outlined by Larson et al. (2007), and include closeness, security, and trust. The skills necessary for initiating and maintaining these close relationships include listening, validating, caring, being trustworthy, possessing good conflict resolution skills, and displaying comfort with intimacy (Parker and Asher 1993). Asher et al. (1996) outlined the specific social tasks associated with friendships that also clearly point to skills needed for successful friendships. These included initiating contact outside of school, being helpful, reliable, and enjoyable to be around, dealing with conflict, disclosing and expressing affection, and navigating a friendship within the context of a peer group. There is also evidence from a large longitudinal study to suggest that skill in identifying emotions in early adolescence is especially important for girls to initiate and maintain same-sex friendships (Rowell et al. 2014). Displaying prosocial behaviors, such as being kind and helpful, is important in developing friendships for both genders (Thomas and Bowker 2013).

The skills needed for successful friendships are especially important to consider given that adolescents tend to have clear expectations for how their friends should behave and treat them, and these expectations are greater for friends than for non-friends (Bigelow and La Gaipa 1975; 1980). Youth must possess the skills to avoid certain transgressions, such as being unreliable when making plans, betraying their friend, or failure to provide help or emotional support (MacEvoy and Asher 2012). If an adolescent is unable to live up to these expectations, or other behaviors that might reasonably be expected of a friend, such as helping a friend in need rather than avoiding or blaming the friend (Glick and Rose 2011), then the friendship will suffer (Glick and Rose 2011; MacEvoy and

Asher 2012). Given that these transgressions are likely to occur, however, understanding and forgiveness are other important skills for successful friendships (Johnson et al. 2013).

In addition to work explicitly examining the skills needed for friendships, research also has focused on the benefits of friendships. These findings may shed light on the social skills needed for friendships, given work suggesting that the associations of social skills with friendship are bi-directional, such that social skills predict successful friendships, and friends influence one another in ways that promote the development of social skills (Glick and Rose 2011; Piaget 1965; Sullivan 1953). Considering this, it may be that some beneficial outcomes of friendship also represent skills needed for friendship. For example, feelings of acceptance and intimacy are a benefit of friendship, but it is also the case that social skill in the ability to build intimacy, such as skills in appropriate self-disclosure (a common indicator of intimacy), predicts friendship success (Asher et al. 1996; Bauminger et al. 2008; Larson et al. 2007). Similarly, positive emotional adjustment is an outcome of friendship, but it is also the case that emotion regulation skills are predictive of friendship success (Oden and Asher 1977). As such, for researchers interested in the social skills necessary for friendship apart from peer status, consideration of the unique benefits of friendship may be a fruitful starting point.

Comparing Peer Status and Friendship as Markers of Social Competence

Based on the skills reviewed thus far, it is apparent that there are skills common to both friendship and peer status. For instance, being able to take the perspective of others (Hawley 2003; Smith and Rose 2011), having a sense of humor (Bowker and Etkin 2014; Rose et al. 2011, 2016), and acting prosocially by providing help to those who need it (Glick and Rose 2011; Cillessen and Rose 2005) are social skills relevant to success in all domains of peer interaction. Importantly, there is much more overlap between skills needed for friendships and peer acceptance, as compared to the skills needed for friendship and peer perceived popularity. Whereas prosocial behavior, understanding, and compassion are important for being well-liked and for having high quality friendships, aggression, social manipulation, and visibility are aspects unique to perceived popularity that may actually have negative effects on friendships (Cillessen and Rose 2005; Hawley 2003; Wargo Aikins and Litwack 2011). For this reason, friendship can often prove to be more at odds with popularity than with peer acceptance.

Less attention has been paid to the distinction between friendships and peer status as markers of social competence compared with the distinction between types of peer status (acceptance vs. popularity). Nevertheless, previous work does indicate that friendships and peer status serve different developmental functions and carry different benefits for adjustment (Furman and Robbins 1985). For instance, some evidence has pointed to the relative positive benefits of friendship over peer status. It is known that having even a single friend is a protective factor against loneliness, low self-esteem, and a host of other mental health problems, even for those adolescents who are of low peer status (Bishop and Inderbitzen 1995; Parker and Asher 1993). Among girls in childhood, high quality friendships have been found to serve as a buffer against internalizing problems as well as the effects of negative peer group experiences, namely peer victimization (Schmidt and Bagwell 2007). Friendships in adolescence, unlike peer acceptance, have also been demonstrated to be directly related to fewer experiences of loneliness (Bukowski et al. 1993). Even in studies of Facebook friendships and interactions, having responsive and involved Facebook friends was found to protect against issues with self-esteem, feelings of belongingness, and the quest for a meaningful existence (Greitemeyer et al. 2014). This was found to be true even after controlling for the total number of Facebook friends, indicating that it was the quality and frequency of the interactions with specific friends that mattered more than simply having a large social network.

Peer status offers unique benefits as well. For instance, peer acceptance provides children with feelings of group acceptance in a larger context (Bukowski et al. 1993), promotes feelings of belongingness (Bukowski et al. 1993), grants access to more potential social partners (Bukowski et al. 1996), and helps children form an identity as part of a group (Furman and Robbins 1985). Peer status in the form of popularity affords visibility in the peer group and the power to influence others (Cillessen and Rose 2005; Rose-Krasnor 1997), as well as access to more friends and potential romantic partners (Bukowski et al. 1996; Carlson and Rose 2007; Dijkstra et al. 2010a). Popular youth are also the object of desired friendships among their peers, as adolescents report that they would ideally like to be friends with popular, well-liked, and aggressive peers, more than they desire friendships with peers who are considered prosocial and kind (i.e., qualities that might make a good friend; Thomas and Bowker 2013).

Moreover, research demonstrating that some youth excel in one domain but not the other provides support for the distinct social competence skills needed for friendships compared with peer status. In a study by Parker and Asher (1993), some children who were low in peer acceptance based on peer nominations did have close and satisfying

friendships (albeit of slightly lower quality), whereas other children, though well-liked among the peer group, were unable to either form or maintain a close friendship. Similar findings emerged in a study which found that some children who were rejected by the peer group were successful in having one or more reciprocal friends, and some children who were average or well-liked did not have any reciprocal friendships (Vandell and Hembree 1994). Work on social skills training, which focused on encouraging participation in group events, cooperation, communication, and validation (or acting friendly and nice) indicated that improvements were only seen in terms of peer acceptance but not friendship (Oden and Asher 1977), providing further evidence that the skills needed for friendship versus peer acceptance are distinct and that youth can excel in one domain without excelling with the other.

Only a single study of adults has explicitly distinguished these two different types of competence (Larson et al. 2007). In this study, close relationship competence was defined based on the skills necessary for forming and sustaining intimate dyadic relationships, and included skills such as being warm, sympathetic, and reassuring to others. Social group competence, on the other hand, was defined as having skills needed to be well liked and accepted by groups, and included skills such as being at ease and humorous in social situations, displaying personal charm, and enjoying time spent in the company of others. Results from this study provided support for the distinction between close relationship competence and social group competence. The two types of competence were correlated but not redundant. Moreover, they were differentially related to adjustment. Compared with social group competence, competence in close relationships was more strongly related to higher ratings of self-worth and educational achievement as well as lower levels of psychological distress and reports of criminal behavior (Larson et al. 2007). Based on these findings and the literature reviewed supporting the conceptual distinction between friendship competence and peer group competence, we call for renewed attention to friendship and peer status as distinct markers of social competence.

Considering Social Goals

Due to the differing advantages and disadvantages of friendships compared with peer status, there is evidence indicating that some youth value attaining success in one of these domains more than the other (Jarvinen and Nicholls 1996). The previously described study by Thomas and Bowker (2013) in which adolescents' desire to be friends with high status peers outweighed their desire to be friends with those youth who demonstrate qualities that would

make a good friend (e.g., kindness) exposed the priority that some adolescents give to attaining status over attaining close friendships. Similarly, a study by LaFontana and Cillessen (2010) revealed individual differences in how much adolescents prioritized popularity compared to how much they prioritized close friendships. In this study, participants were presented with hypothetical vignettes and asked how they would respond given two options. One of the responses involved neglecting some other domain in their social lives (e.g., friendship, academic or athletic achievement, following the rules, prosocial or compassionate behavior toward a rejected peer, and romantic interests) in favor of pursuing popularity. Selecting the other option would indicate that participants prioritized the other social domain over enhancing their perceived popularity. Twenty-seven percent of youth in early adolescence (grades five through eight) reported that they would forsake friendship in their quest to achieve popularity. About one-third (34 %) of the adolescents in ninth through twelfth grades also chose to enhance their perceived popularity, even at the risk of losing a good friend. The remaining two-thirds, however, prioritized friendship over peer status.

Follow-up studies provided additional support for the importance of considering adolescents' social goals, such that those adolescents who prioritized popularity were more likely to act aggressively, were less likely to be thought of by their peers as someone who kept their promises, and were less likely to demonstrate prosocial behaviors (Cillessen et al. 2014; van den Broek et al. 2015). Additionally, prioritizing popularity moderated the associations between popularity and risky behaviors, such that popular adolescents who prioritized popularity were especially likely to engage in risky behaviors (van den Broek et al. 2015). In these studies, important effects may have been masked if social goals were not taken into account. Thus, this work highlights the benefit of considering social goals in social competence research.

Additional evidence for the importance of social goals comes from a study by Brown and Lohr (1987), which examined relations between adolescents' social crowd membership and self-esteem. These researchers assessed the salience that each adolescent personally attached to crowd membership by directly asking them to rate how important they felt it was to belong to a crowd. The results suggested that peer crowd status did affect self-esteem, but only for those adolescents who placed value on crowd status. These findings were consistent with theorizing by Rosenberg (1979) that crowd status would be an important predictor of adjustment in adolescence only if the adolescent considered crowd status as significant to them in their own life. Interestingly, of the participants who did not belong to a crowd in the Brown and Lohr (1987) study, less than half indicated that they desired to belong to a crowd,

and only two percent of all participants were dissatisfied with their current crowd affiliation. Accordingly, Dijkstra et al. (2010b) suggested that researchers should assess whether those adolescents who place great value on becoming popular but fail to do so are at higher risk for developing internalizing or externalizing problems compared with youth who do not value popularity.

Taken together, this work points to the importance of assessing youth's social goals, in terms of whether they value and strive for peer status (particularly popularity) compared with friendship when utilizing measures of peer status and friendship as markers of social competence. In keeping with the proposed definition of social competence as effectiveness in reaching social goals (Duck 1989; Ford 1982), the social goals of the adolescent and whether the adolescent is successful in attaining those goals must be taken into account. Consider the following example. Alex is an adolescent who highly values status and aspires to be popular, even if popularity comes at the expense of his friendships. For Alex, then, achieving popularity (reaching his social goal) would be a good indicator of his social competence. Sam, on the other hand, is an adolescent for whom having a few very close friends is of utmost importance. She successfully maintains high quality, enduring friendships and does not care about being popular. In Sam's case, a lack of popularity should not be deemed an indicator of poor social competence because she has not tried and failed to achieve popularity; rather, she has successfully achieved a different social goal and therefore is actually quite socially competent by a different measure. Without taking into account an adolescent's social goals, research that equates popularity with social competence operates from the flawed premise that popularity is valued and strived for by all youth. The work reviewed here demonstrates that this is simply not the case. As such, it is imperative for research on social competence to take adolescents' social goals into account.

Based on the evidence presented above, we argue that researchers should heed the advice of Wargo Aikins and Litwack (2011) by asking adolescents themselves about their individual social goals rather than making assumptions about adolescents' goals, such as by assuming that popularity is important to all youth. Admittedly, including multiple measures of friendship, peer status, and social goals in a single study is not always feasible. However, knowledge in this area will be moved forward by studies that assess adolescents' perceptions of whether the particular indicator of social competence under investigation is important to them and something to which they aspire. To do so, researchers may utilize the priority of status measure developed by LaFontana and Cillessen (2010) or the popularity goal measure used by Dawes and Xie (2014). Even the inclusion of a single item, as was done in the study by

Brown and Lohr (1987), may prove useful. If assessment of social goals is not feasible, then at the very least researchers should be cognizant of typical developmental changes in priority of status across childhood into adolescence and emerging adulthood (LaFontana and Cillessen 2010) that may impact their findings. Given their influence in so many other domains (e.g., Brechwald and Prinstein 2011), peers are also likely to influence adolescents' primary social goals (i.e., desiring close friendships vs. social status), as well as their ability to attain those goals (Dijkstra et al. 2013), and as such the goals adolescents hold may change across time. In longitudinal work, assessing these goals at each time point is recommended.

Friendship Quality and Friendship Stability as Markers of Social Competence

Research on friendship as an indicator of social competence has commonly focused on two distinct aspects of friendship, friendship quality and friendship stability. The quality of youth's friendships refers to the extent to which the relationship is characterized by provisions such as intimacy, help, support, validation, caring, and companionship (Bukowski et al. 1994; Parker and Asher 1993). Friendship stability refers to continuity of a particular friendship over time (Poulin and Chan 2010).

As described in the sections above, social skills important for friendship quality include building intimacy, engaging in appropriate disclosure, and earning trust and respect (Asher et al. 1996; Larson et al. 2007; Parker and Asher 1993). Social skills implicated in friendship stability include being able to navigate conflict and friendship transgressions without resorting to dissolution, for instance by using social perspective-taking skills and being forgiving (Johnson et al. 2013; Selman 1980). Another skill implicated in the quest to maintain friendships is the ability to "suspend egoism" and act as equal partners in the friendship (Hartup 1996; Sullivan 1953). The necessity for these skills seem to have their roots in childhood, as findings from a study conducted by Fonzi et al. (1997) revealed that when children were observed in a structured task, those who had stable friendships were more perceptive and sympathetic to their friend's needs than were those children who were unable to maintain friendships.

While there does seem to be some overlap in the social skills needed for friendship quality and friendship stability, researchers have attempted to differentiate them. For instance, the Adolescent Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (AICQ; Buhrmester 1990), distinguishes five domains of interpersonal competence that are important in adolescent friendships. Categories such as being emotionally supportive of friends and engaging in self-disclosure

represent skills most relevant for having high quality friendships. Acting appropriately assertive and managing conflict, on the other hand, might be skills put to use in the interest of having stable, enduring friendships.

Although both friendship quality and friendship stability require social skills, we argue that they are not equally valid markers of social competence. We do not dispute the use of friendship quality as an indicator of social competence. However, we argue that the context should be taken into account when deciding whether friendship stability is a good marker of social competence, and that maintaining a friendship may not necessarily be the most socially competent course of action in all circumstances.

For instance, consider the experience of peer contagion. Research has documented that several behavioral and mental health problems are “contagious,” in that individuals who maintain friendships with others who demonstrate such problems are themselves at risk for developing these problems. Adolescents who have friends that engage in risky behavior, such as substance use, are more likely to adopt this behavior over time (Giletta et al. 2012; Urberg et al. 2003). Similarly, adolescents with a depressed friend are more likely to become depressed over time (Prinstein 2007), especially if the friends engage in co-rumination or excessive talk about their problems (Schwartz-Mette and Rose 2012; Schwartz-Mette and Smith 2016). As such, ending a friendship may be an indicator of social competence if an adolescent has the skill to recognize that a friendship is no longer healthy or beneficial, or that his or her own well-being may be compromised by remaining in the friendship.

The social goals of the adolescent should also be considered when determining whether friendship stability should serve as a marker of social competence for a particular adolescent. As outlined above, some adolescents have very strong desires to achieve popularity and value this social goal above and beyond their desire for close or enduring friendships (LaFontana and Cillessen 2010). One method of achieving the social goal of popularity might be to attempt to befriend more popular peers, while dissolving friendships with less popular peers who might interfere with the adolescent’s ability to achieve popularity. Longitudinal evidence suggests that this can be an effective technique in procuring better social standing in the peer group, as adolescents often try to befriend more popular peers in the hopes of becoming popular themselves (Dijkstra et al. 2011; Dijkstra et al. 2013). One study found that adolescents’ popularity increased as they affiliated more closely with popular peers, and in fact, being best friends with a popular peer was the strongest predictor of adolescents’ popularity (Dijkstra et al. 2010b). However, this strategy did come at the price of likeability (Dijkstra et al. 2010b). These

findings suggest that some adolescents are willing to pursue popularity, even if it means being liked less by others and sacrificing friendships with those of lower status. Adolescents often recognize that pursuing popularity will require acting mean toward friends, and can identify the motivation behind mean behavior (in girls specifically), as wanting to gain social status (Crothers et al. 2005). Thus, ending a friendship with a less popular peer in order to gain popularity may seem mean or manipulative, but it is nonetheless socially savvy and in line with the definition of social competence as the ability to effectively reach a desired social goal (Duck 1989; Ford 1982; Rose-Krasnor 1997).

Conclusion

In this review, we have advocated for a more nuanced approach to the study of social competence in adolescence. Although researchers have recently paid increased attention to the distinct skills needed for peer acceptance versus popularity, similar attention has not been given to the distinction between peer group competence and friendship competence, and more work is needed that compares the social skills required across these domains. Such an approach will enhance the effectiveness of social skills interventions by increasing specificity in enhancement of peer group competence compared with friendship competence. We have argued that a more nuanced view of social competence also requires consideration of adolescents’ social goals and their effectiveness in achieving those goals. Past research using popularity as an indicator of social competence operates from the assumption that popularity is a desirable goal for all youth, but the work reviewed here demonstrates otherwise. As such, if popularity is not the adolescent’s goal, then a lack of popularity should not be deemed indicative of low social competence for that adolescent. We have further argued that, in contrast with friendship quality, friendship stability is a poor marker of social competence. Ending a friendship may actually be an indicator of better, rather than poorer, social competence if youth’s own well-being may be compromised by remaining in the friendship or if the friendship is dissolved in order to achieve a more highly prioritized social goal, namely popularity. Thus, a nuanced approach to the study of social competence should take into account the context of friendship dissolutions to determine whether a lack of friendship stability is indicative of poor social competence or, alternatively, greater social savvy. Future work that adopts this type of approach will offer a fuller understanding of what it means to be socially competent in adolescence.

Author Contributions KF conceptualized the review paper and drafted the manuscript; RS gave critical feedback and helped draft the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent This article does not contain any new studies with participants from which to collect informed consent.

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