
**ASSESSING YOUNG CHILDREN'S SOCIAL COMPETENCE: THE GREEK
VERSION OF THE SOCIAL COMPETENCE SCALE FOR
PRESCHOOLERS-PARENT VERSION**

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ABSTRACT: *Successful social functioning in the kindergarten is related to future academic success and is regarded as one of the basic goals of the curriculum. Assessment of social competence is therefore critical to identify children at risk for poor outcomes and to provide evidence for the effectiveness of relevant activities and programs. Parents are considered quite reliable informants regarding children's social competence and measurements should include relevant behaviors that may develop regardless context and situation. The purpose of present study was to examine the psychometric properties of the Greek version of the Social Competence Scale-Parent version (SCS-P), taking into account that relevant robust measures of social competence are lacking with reference to the Greek context. Mothers of 913 children attending public kindergartens, aged 4-6 years, participated in the study, from 33 prefectures of Greece. Exploratory factor analysis revealed two robust and reliable factors. Only two items did not load onto the expected factor showing the value-laden and culture specific nature of social competence.*

KEYWORDS: social competence, kindergarten, parents, Greece, scale

INTRODUCTION

There are quite different ways that the multifaceted construct of social competence is conceptualized and thus measured, leading to a lack of congruence among different methodological approaches and consequently to diverse outcome results (Matson, 2009). Researchers highlight different dimensions of social functioning that delineate socially competent behaviors, such as reaching goals, problem solving, adaptation to demands and adjustment. Recently the issue of affect, including the ability to send and receive affective messages and experience emotions, is also stressed (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001), suggesting that emotion knowledge lies on the core of social competence (Trentacosta & Fine, 2010) and should be regarded as one of its basic components.

All these dimensions presuppose a judgement of effectiveness in terms of a set of milestones that determine social functioning. One basic issue, not evidenced though in some of the given definitions of the term, is the "shared" standards in valuing successful and effective social functioning (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Dodge et al., 1986). Such evaluations concern the "person" in action, take into account the "situation" and incorporate the "other" or the "viewer" (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001), not only as an

informant but also as the recipient of the effects of the behavior, to determine successful social performance. Consequently, social competence also refers to social understanding, communication skills and reasoning for the person to apply successful social behaviors in diverse situations and circumstances (Langeveld, Gundersen, & Svartdal, 2012). Although social and emotional skills constitute the backbone of social competence, it actually covers a broader set of qualities and traits that determine the effective use of these skills, considering the needs and perspectives of the others involved in the situation and the results/consequences produced. As Joy (2016) pointed, *positive social competence is a combination of knowledge and appropriate implementation of social skills, abilities to enable a child to have positive relationships with peers and adults, and drive and attainment of goals which serve as a foundation for increased self-esteem and readiness for school success from a social vantage point* (p. 282).

Other researchers point out the cultural underpinnings of competence, as different socio-cultural groups lay emphasis on different aspects of social behavior or place importance to the same skills but to a different extent (see Harkness et al., 2007). The developmental perspective is another important issue that shape our understanding and empirical assessment of social competence. As noted, different social behaviors are expected by children aged 2 or 7 (Guralnick & Neville, 1997). Moreover, social competence seems to increase with age, as it is reported in a number of studies (Vahedi, Farrokhi, & Farajian, 2012), while gender also plays a significant role with girls getting higher scores in relevant measurements than boys (Mendez, McDermott, & Fantuzzo, 2002; Qin & Yong, 2002). As some researchers point, these differences, especially regarding gender, may also arise from socio-culturally oriented expectations, taking into account that teachers, for example, seem to be more tolerant to boys and critical to girls for aggressive behavior (Ren & Wyver, 2016; Vahendi et al., 2012). Interestingly, different effects of training programs are observed in different age groups, with younger children gaining more compared to the older ones, regardless school system factors in different countries (Langeveld et al., 2012).

Early childhood constitutes an important period for the development of social competence as it has been found that successful social functioning in the preschool is related to future academic success in kindergarten and beyond (Coolahan, Fantuzzo, & Mendez, 2000; Denham, 2006). The importance of training programs in the children's early scholastic lives has been also highlighted by the fact that social competence seems to play a mediating role in the relation between training and positive changes in behavioral problems (Langeveld et al., 2012). Actually, the negative relation between social competence and problematic behavior has been evidenced in studies (Qin & Yong, 2002; Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). The importance of successful development of social competence in the early years is also stressed by the fact that children seem to enter formal schooling without having the necessary social and emotional skills that optimize successful adaptation and learning (Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Still, relevant research designs and intervention programs addressing early childhood are limited (Giménez-Dasí, Fernández-Sánchez, & Quintanilla, 2015). As Gouley, Brotman and Huang stressed (2008), identification of early social competence is crucial to identify children at risk for poor outcomes with implications for children's adjustment.

Assessment of social competence is critical to provide teachers with the necessary information to design relevant activities, programs and interventions and also to evaluate teachers' effective teaching (Barblett & Maloney, 2010). Apart from the complexities in measuring social competence that stem from the multidimensionality of the concept, a number of challenges, especially with reference to young children, are also evidenced. Firstly, development of social and emotional skills is rapid during the early years and measurements should be able to grasp these changes in a valid way. Assessment and evaluation of children's competences should not take place in isolation from the family and cultural context as they concern value-laden constructs (Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak, 2007). The validity of teachers' judgements of children's social competence has been questioned by a number of researchers as they seem to be influenced by their own characteristics, certain preferences concerning social skills, especially those related to academic outcomes and contextual factors in the preschool setting (Gest, 2006; Mashburn et al., 2006). Therefore, research should also be addressed to other informants, such as parents, to gain a deeper understanding of children's behaviors and competences in diverse contexts and circumstances. Moreover, Arnold and Lindner-Müller (2012) suggest that empirical research concerning social competence should provide evidence, apart from meeting reliability and validity criteria, about the predicative ability of the construct with reference to variables such as well-being and academic achievement.

Taking into consideration the need for a reliable, valid, easy-to-use and brief measure to assess social competence in preschoolers, Gouley, Brotman and Huang (2008) provided evidence for utility the Social Competence Scale (SCS)-Parent version (Conduct Problem Prevention Research Group, 1995), for use with preschool-age children. Following this work, the purpose of the present study is to examine the psychometric properties of the Social Competence Scale for Preschoolers-Parent version (SCS-Pr-P) in the Greek context aiming to provide a useful and time saving instrument for research and practice. Moreover, this study examines the utility of the scale for a different socio-cultural group than the American English speaking one.

METHOD

Participants

In the study, which is part of a larger research study (Penderi, 2012), 913 mothers whose children were aged between 4 to 6 years attending public kindergartens participated in the study. They were the informants regarding their young children's social competence skills. Their age was ranged between 22 to 54 years ($M= 35.5$, $SD=4.66$) from 33 prefectures of Greece representing all the 13 Greek regions and diverse areas with regard to urbanity (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mothers' sociodemographic background information (N=913)

	Percentage %
<i>Areas of living</i>	
Metropolitan	38,7
Urban	17,6
Semi-urban	25,9
Rural	17,6
<i>Educational level</i>	
Up to secondary	15,3
High school	46,9
Tertiary education	37,5
<i>Children</i>	
<i>Gender</i>	
Girls	51,7
Boys	48,3
<i>Age</i>	
4-5 years	41,6
5-6 years	58,4

Instrument

The Social Competence Scale (SCS)-Parent version (Conduct Problem Prevention Research Group [CPPRG] (1995) was used in the present study because: (a) it is a brief measure, consisting of 12 items that describe positive socio-emotional behaviors focusing on three important skill areas for young children, prosocial and communication skills and emotion regulation; (b) the utility of the measure had been examined and there is evidence that it is valid and reliable across early to middle childhood, with high-risk and normative groups (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1995, 2002; Gouley et al., 2008; Howell, Graham-Bermann, Czyz, & Lilly, 2010). Consequently, it can be used to follow the developmental trajectory of social competence of children from an early age and thus inform the design of relevant interventions and provide feedback for their effectiveness. However, there is little evidence about its use in different socio-cultural contexts. Another advantage of the SCS lies in the fact that the behaviors described are neither context nor situation specific, which means that there is no need for raters to observe children in some particular setting (Gouley et al., 2008). As a matter of fact, the SCS is particularly suitable to be used as a screening and repeated measure with regard to interventions and programs that focus on "continuity" in children's experiences and promote home-school-community collaboration and may refer to typical or/and non-typical education. Moreover, the items of the parent version constitute a subset of the items of the teacher version, so it permits cross-checking of children's social function in different settings by different informants.

Responses on the 12 items are coded on a five-point Likert scale: "Not at all (0)," "A little (1)," "Moderately well (2)," "Well (3)," and "Very well (4). According to the developers of the initial scale the factorial structure of the scale consists of two subscales, with equal number of items each: (i) Prosocial/Communication Skills (Items 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12) and (ii) Emotional Regulation Skills (Items 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8). Two

subscores are calculated based on the mean of the separate items' scores of each subscale as well as a total mean score of the 12 items is also reported. Internal consistency Cronbach's alpha coefficients have been found to be high for both subscales ranging from .77 to .84 for "prosocial/communication skills", and .76 to .82 for the "emotion regulation" as well as the overall scale (.85 to .92) (see Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1995, 2002; Gouley et al., 2008). The present study was undertaken in a different language and cultural setting than the context of the original instrument development. Following the methodology proposed in cross-cultural research (e.g., Ægisdóttir, Gerstein, & Cinanbaş, 2008; Brislin, 1986; van de Vijver & Hambleton, 1996), four kindergarten teachers with proficient knowledge of English translated and adopted the items to be adjusted to the Greek context. The four versions were then cross-checked for meaning deviations. The final version was back translated by a competent English spoken translator according to the relevant guidelines concerning the adaptation of psychological instruments developed in different language /cultural context (see, for example, Hambleton & de Jong, 2003; van de Vijver & Hambleton, 1996).

Procedure

Participants were reached through their children's kindergarten teachers. Multi-stage sampling techniques were used to select prefectures in each region, then districts, schools and finally parents (see Penderi, 2012). After schools had been chosen and administration gave permission to proceed with the research, kindergarten teachers were asked to randomly select 4 parents whose children were in their classroom, to take part in the study. The questionnaire and a letter explaining the research purposes and ethical issues were sent by post or were given personally by the first author to the teachers and then to parents. Participants were given a period of two weeks to return questionnaires in closed envelopes to teachers, who in turn were asked to send back the envelopes to the first author using pre-paid courier services.

Analysis Plan

To examine the psychometric properties of the Greek version of the Social Competence Scale for Preschoolers-Parent version (SCS-P) a number of procedures were applied:

- i. factor structure of the SCS-P was examined through exploratory factor analysis procedures, using principal component method with varimax rotation, as suggested by developers (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1995)
- ii. internal consistency of the two subscales and the total score of the scale was assessed calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficients.

To identify the most advanced behaviors in the kindergarten children of our sample, descriptive statistics for each item were given. To check influence of children's age and gender on mothers' reports about children's social, independent samples *t*-test was conducted.

RESULTS

Validity and Reliability

The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy had a value of .87, which far exceeded the minimum standard of .60 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Bartlett's Test of

Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2=2770.93$, $df=66$, $p<.001$) suggesting a reasonable level of correlation between the items of the scale. Analysis showed two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, which accounted for 45.8% of variance explained. Items loaded on the expected factors, except for items 4 (Resolves problems with friends or siblings) and 6 (Does what told to do) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Factor structure of the Greek version of the Social Competence Scale-Parent version (SCS-Pr-P)

Items	Prosocial/Communication Skills	Emotional Regulation
10. Helpful to others	.790	.096
11. Listens to others points of view	.758	.162
9. Shares things with others	.683	.193
12. Can give suggestions without being bossy	.563	.375
7. Good at understanding others feelings	.543	.220
6. Does what told to do	.393	.245
5. Can calm down when upset or excited	.106	.784
2. Can cope well with failure, do not react negatively when failing	.128	.707
4. Resolves problems with friends or siblings	.181	.626
8. Controls temper when disagreement	.372	.606
1. Accepts things not going his/her way	.269	.514
3. Thinks before acting, does not do whatever comes to mind	.362	.452
Variance explained	36.02%	9.80%
Cronbach's alpha	.75	.75

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess relations between subscales and the total score SCS-P. There were strong positive correlations between the two subscales ($r_{905}=.61$, $p<.01$), as well as between the Prosocial/Communication skills subscale and the total score ($r_{905}=.89$, $p<.01$) and between the Emotional Regulation skills subscale and total score ($r_{905}=.91$, $p<.01$) (see Table 3).

Internal consistency of the total scale was high (Cronbach's $\alpha=.83$), while reliability of the two subscales was in a medium to high and acceptable level (Cronbach's $\alpha=.75$, for both subscales).

Descriptive (Item Level) Statistics

In Table 3, the mean scores for each item of the scale are presented to identify those skills that are more advanced in the kindergarten. As evidenced, items with higher scores are included in the Prosocial/Communication subscale.

Table 3. Item level Descriptive Statistics

Items	M	SD
10. Helpful to others	3.34	.75
9. Shares things with others	2.92	.99
7. Good at understanding others feelings	2.91	.92
11. Listens to others points of view	2.88	.87
12. Can give suggestions without being bossy	2.46	1.04
3. Thinks before acting, does not do whatever comes to mind	2.42	1.05
4. Resolves problems with friends or siblings	2.27	1.03
6. Does what told to do	2.23	.98
8. Controls temper when disagreement	2.22	1.01
5. Can calm down when upset or excited	1.99	1.10
2. Can cope well with failure, do not react negatively when failing	1.93	1.026
1. Accepts things not going his/her way	1.92	.97

Background Variables and Social Competence

Independent samples t-test results showed that only children's age seems to differentiate mothers' reports about kindergarten children's social competence. More specifically, it was evidenced that older children (5-6 years old) had higher scores in the two subscales and the total score of the SCS-P than younger ones (see Table 4).

Table 4. t-test results comparing scores on social competence for older and younger kindergarten children

	older children (5-6 years old)		younger children (4-5 years old)		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Prosocial/Communication skills	2.83	3.61	2.73	3.83	2.252*
Emotional Regulation skills	2.17	4.18	2.06	3.97	2.400*
Total score SCS-Pr-P	2.50	6.94	2.40	7.02	2.659*

*p<.05

DISCUSSION

The importance of social competence in children's educational and social lives has been stressed in research and policy making (Brophy-Herb et al., 2007). It is a broad construct that refers to children's ability to maintain positive relationships, to perform successfully in social tasks, to manage behavior and communicate positively with other people (Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000; Denham & Burton, 2003; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Ladd, Buhs, & Seid, 2000). These behaviors refer to social and emotional skills that constitute basic developmental milestones for young children, which seem rather adaptive to educational treatment and learning.

As evidenced in a number of projects, social competence may be promoted through targeted educational programs that focus on socio-emotional development and provide opportunities for home-school collaboration to enhance continuity in children's

experiences (e.g. Brieman et al., 2008; Nix, Bierman, Domitrovich, & Gill, 2013; Webster-Stratton, & Reid, 2003). Thus, assessment of young children's social competence is a key factor to: (i) identify early risks for educational and social adaptation, (ii) inform professionals about children's specific needs so as to guide the development of targeted activities and interventions, (iii) provide feedback for effectiveness of these programs and (iv) provide evidence for teachers' successful performance (Brophy-Herb et al., 2007).

The purpose of the present study was to examine the psychometric properties of the Greek version of the Social Competence Scale-Parent version (SCS -P), taking into account that relevant robust measures of social competence are lacking with reference to the Greek context. Moreover, regarding the utility of this particular instrument there is restricted evidence concerning its use in different socio-cultural contexts. There are a number of reasons that guided the selection of this particular scale. It is the shortest compared to other measurements that usually include more than 30 items (e.g. LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996) consisting only 12 items. It focuses on three basic dimensions of socio-emotional functioning that concern prosocial behavior, communication skills and emotional regulation. It is not necessary for respondents to observe children in a particular setting, as the corresponding behaviors may develop regardless context and situation. Moreover, it was found to provide valid and reliable assessment of social competence for a significant developmental period, from early to middle childhood, despite the fact that social competent skills are age sensitive and may differ across developmental periods (Gouley et al., 2008).

The study focused on 913 Greek mothers' reports about kindergarten children's social competence. The exploratory factor analysis supported the two factor solution according to developers of the scale and other researchers that used it with preschool children (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1995; Corrigan, 2002; Gouley et al., 2008). It seemed to have sound psychometric results that are similar to those presented with reference to American kindergarten children (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1995). The level of correlation between the two subscales was medium, indicating the distinctive nature of these two dimensions of socio-emotional skills that underlie the construct of social competence. Still, taking also into account the fact that internal consistency of the total score of the scale was higher than that of the two subscales, we could note that findings may highlight developers' suggestion concerning the tendency of the young children's parents to regard social competence as a unidimensional construct (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1995). Also, Gouley et al. (2008) found that the two factors had overlapping variation and that the one-factor model had the same good fit as the two-factor model for young children.

With reference to the Greek sample, the fact that two of the items did not load to the expected factors provided evidence for the influence of the socio-cultural context in respondents' understanding of social competence. More specifically, Greek mothers interpreted item 4 (Resolves problems with friends or siblings) describing a behavior that mostly involves emotion regulation skills instead of prosocial and communication abilities, according to developers of the American scale. Respectively, they regarded item 6 (Does what told to do) as more indicative of prosocial and communication skills

than of emotional regulation. Respondents' different perspectives of the skills underlying behaviors may be an interesting topic for cross-cultural research to gain deeper understanding of the cultural underpinnings of social behavior and functioning (Chen & French, 2008).

Accordingly, the mean scores of the 12 items of the Greek version of the SCS-P for the kindergarten children, were closer to those concerning the normative sample of the first grade American children (Corrigan, 2002) than to scores regarding kindergarten children (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1995) or the mean scores provided for the preschoolers (Gouley et al., 2008).

Although there is research evidence suggesting age and gender effects on children's social competence (e.g. Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000; Denham, Blair, DeMulder, Levitas, Sawyer, & Auerbach-Major, 2003; Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004) results of this study supported only the influence of age on kindergarten children social competence, according to mothers' reports. The lack of gender differences in young children's social competence was also reported in Gouley et al. (2008) study but concerning a different age range. Pekdogan and Kanak (2016) who focused on the a same age group of children but used a different measurement of social competence also found no gender differences with regard to positive social functioning. With reference to the influence of age, it may be noted that in the Greek kindergarten children's enrolment is mandatory only for the 5-year old children. The 4-year old children, apart from staying at home, could attend either a child center or kindergarten. This institutional difference in the 4-year old children education and care services, in Greece, may imply different socially and culturally driven developmental expectations by parents and teachers, reflected also in children's behaviors. It is noteworthy that Gouley et al. (2008) found only small age effects on social competence in preschoolers and that regarding the high risk sample.

Overall, this study provided evidence for the psychometric robustness of the Greek version of the Social Competence Scale-Parent version, for its use with kindergarten children. Discussions of results in comparison with evidence from international research highlighted certain issues concerning the influence of the socio-cultural context in the development of social competence in young children that may suggest the need for further examination with cross-cultural research designs. Another interesting point would be the study of developmental trajectories of social competence across broader age ranges. Moreover, considerations of teachers' reports along with parents' assessments would promote our understanding of children's social functioning in different settings. One of the restrictions of the present study is the lack of examination of the concurrent validity of the scale for the Greek kindergarten children sample.

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