

Social Networking Media Influence on Adolescent Social Competence

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EDPS 650

July 23, 2013

Two essential aspects of social competence are an individual's ability to effectively interact with their environment and with others within their environment (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). Adolescence is a critical period in the development of social competence. It is during this developmental stage that adolescents begin to choose for themselves who they are going to interact with and how. Technology, specifically social networking media, has become a large part of how adolescents choose to interact and communicate with others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). According to Bronfenbrenner's (1993) bio-ecological systems theory, a child's development is influenced by the various layers of environments surrounding them. This paper will examine the influence of social networking media within an adolescent's bio-ecological microsystem on the development of adolescent social competence.

Social Competence Prism

Social competence is a complex, multidimensional concept involving social, emotional, cognitive skills and behavioral skills that individuals need to acquire for successful social adaptations (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Other skills, such as social communication and interpersonal skills also influence the development of social competence (Semrud-Clikeman, 1997). The skills and behaviours required for social competence depend upon the age of the individual and the social situation, and is built upon previously learned skills and experiences (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007).

There are a variety of different approaches to the operational definition of social competence, and though definitions of social competence may differ in their focus, most include the concept of effectiveness in interaction as the key aspect to social competence (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Rose-Krasnor (1997) proposed a three leveled prism of examining social competence,

with each level ranging in importance according to purpose of interaction, and having a hierarchical relationship with the each other.

The topmost level is theoretical in nature, defining social competence as effectiveness in social interactions in the areas of transactional, context-dependent, performance, organizing construct, and relativity. Transactional refers to interactions occurring between people and is judged on how each participant responds to overall behaviours of those involved. Social competence is context-dependent, meaning that recognition and awareness that certain behaviours are more appropriate in one context or environment than another is a vital skill during social interactions. Performance refers to the consistency of appropriate behaviors in various everyday interactions, even when the individual is not motivated to do so. The fourth area involves employing the appropriate behaviour in each social interaction. Relativity involves the ability to recognize and choose the correct behaviour to meet the goal of socialization.

The middle level, known as the Index Level, consists of summary indices of social competence, which reflects qualities of interaction sequences, relationships, group status and social self-efficacy. The elements of this level have a social base, because they are determined through interactions with others, and are divided into two domains, self and other. The Self domain focuses on the individual's own needs, whereas the Other domain involves interpersonal connectedness. Both domains are divided into various social contexts, reflecting the situation-specific nature of individual relationships.

The bottom level of the prism is the Skills Level, which includes the social, emotional, and cognitive abilities and motivation required for the development of social competence. Specific skills in the area of perspective taking, communication, empathy, affect regulation, and social

problem solving are driven and guided by an individual's goals and values. These skills can be relevant across contexts, but may be more helpful in certain social contexts than in others, and are a vital to the development of each of the skills in the other levels of the prism.

Bio-Ecological Techno-Subsystem

According to bio-ecological-systems theory, a child and adolescent are part of an environmental social network consisting of five interrelated, yet hierarchical systems, which have influence on their development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's (1993) bio-ecological systems theory is a process-person-context-time model which is organized in five levels of person-environment interaction: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Therefore, bio-ecological systems theory provides a conceptual framework for examining the multiple layers of context that influence human development, including the development of social competence (Spencer, Harpalani, Fegley, Dell'Angelo, & Seaton, 2003).

Johnson and Pupilampu (2008) proposed a dimension to be added to the microsystem, which they refer to as the techno-subsystem. The techno-subsystem mediates reciprocal interactions between an individual with living and nonliving elements of communication technologies in their immediate environment, as well as with influences among and within the other systems. In technology rich nations such as Canada, many adolescents use technology, such as cell phones and social networking media, to keep in contact with their parents and friends on a daily basis. However, the influence of technology doesn't end at the microsystem, but has the potential to influence the development of an individual in each system. Within the mesosystem, children and their parents use school internet portals to access the child's homework assignment or marks, or skype their grandparents for a visit. Technology use in the

exosystem may influence the child when parental use of technology at their work affects the child's use of the same technology at home. In the macrosystem, how the media, their communities or culture view technology will influence the exposure of technology and its influences on the child. In the chronosystem, in technology advanced nations, social expectations of technology competence change in relation to life transitions, such as competency and access to technology being an asset when an individual begins university or has the opportunity to take online courses. Therefore, by including techno-subsystems into the bio-ecological systems theory provides an opportunity to organize and understand the potential impact technology on all areas of child and adolescent develop (Johnson & Puplampu, 2008).

Social Networking Media

One of the most revolutionary aspects of social networking media is that it delivers information for free to a wide group of people with just a click of a button. Social networking media are forms of electronic communication that allow individuals to share information and ideas with others online. Content shared via social media has the potential to reach one person or one million people, depending on its reach, message, and audience (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social networking media encompasses many different technologies, yet the underlying goal is the same, to encourage communication and social interactions through technology. Many social networking media sites promote this sharing of information by encouraging users to establish a profile containing information about their interests or stats, join social groups of common interest, locate or suggest other users with whom they share a connection or interest with, as well as send private and publicly viewable messages on other's profiles (Boyd & Ellis, 2007; Tokunaga, 2011).

Adolescent Use of Social Networking Media

During adolescence, the development and maintenance of relationships, specifically in the area of peer relationships, become particularly important (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). Many adolescents employ various forms of technology as a means to communicate and interact with their family and friends. A study conducted by Lenhart (2012) examined how adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 communicated with others during their spare time. Results indicated that 63% of adolescents use texts, 39% use a mobile phone, 35% socialize face to face, and 29% use social network sites to keep in touch with friends and family out of school hours. The adolescents in this study reported that they used technology mainly because it's readily available to them, they are able to communicate easily with others who are not in the area, they can control with whom they interact with and for how long, and they are able to multitask while they are communicating with someone.

However, adolescents are not just using social networking media to communicate with friends and family, they are also using social networking media as a form of entertainment and a means to meet or reconnect with others. Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zichuhr (2010) found that 95% of 14-17 year olds that they interviewed have accessed social networking media sites at least once as a means to communicate and interact with others. One study's results found that 50% of adolescents between the age of 13 and 17 log onto a social networking media site to meet and interact with others more than once a day, and 22% of those adolescents are on their favourite social networking media sites more than ten times a day (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communications and Media, 2011). However, adolescents are not just logging onto a social networking site, as 72% of 12 to 17 year olds have their own social network profile and

47% of those profiles are not private, but are viewable to everyone (Cox Communications, 2009).

Social Networking Media's Influence on Adolescent Social Competence

Social networking media appears to be prevalent in many adolescent's lives today, and as proposed by Johnson and Pupilampu (2008), has the potential to influence all areas of their development, including social competence. Social networking media lends to both positive and negative influences to the development of adolescent social competence.

Positive Influence

Adolescents, who are shy, lonely, anxious or depressed, indicate that they are able to learn and practice interpersonal skills comfortably online through social networking sites, as it allowed them to experience relating to others without the anxiety of a face to face interaction (Pierce, 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). These studies demonstrate how social networking media can provide an opportunity for adolescents to communicate, integrate, and participate in social environments. Some adolescents who find it difficult to socialize in face to face situations are able to express themselves and to interact more easily through social networking media, providing them with an opportunity to develop social competence skills for both online and face to face social situations.

One study found that adolescents generally use online communication and social networking media as an additional means of communication to enhance the quality of friendships (Lee, 2009). The use of social networking media had no affect on the amount of time they spent in face-to-face interaction with friends and family (Lee, 2009). The results from this study indicate that social networking media does not influence adolescent social competence in either a

positive or negative manner, but is simply another means for adolescents to socially interact with others.

A review of literature and studies depicted that adolescents found that interacting on social networking sites provided them an opportunity to take their time in responding to any comments they need to ponder over, whereas in face-to-face interactions, taking this time to generate an answer or thought is not always permissible. (O’Keeffe et al., 2011). This time provided them with the opportunity to contemplate, edit, and review their communications before responding, all of which are skills that promote social competence.

Each of these studies supports a level of the Rose-Krasnor’s (1997) prism of social competence. Adolescents are indicating that through social networking media, they are able to practice or enhance positive effective qualities of interactions and communication with others on a consistent basis, practice problem solving skills, and address both their own personal needs and promote interpersonal connectedness with the people they are interacting with.

Negative Influence

Just as there are positive influences of social networking media on adolescent social competence, there are negative influences as well. One study found that users of social networking media have the potential to consciously harm relationships when they ignore or deny friend requests, delete messages or identification tags, or broadcast other’s personal information on a public forum (Tokunaga, 2011). Social networking media users have indicated that performing such purposeful harmful actions are easier to do online as they do not have to deal with any immediate conflict resulting from such behaviours as they would have to in a face to face situation (Tokunaga, 2011).

Research has suggested that some frequent users of the Internet and social networking media tend to lack the emotional competence characteristics of high emotional intelligence, which include the ability to perceive, process and understand one's own and other's emotions during interaction, during both online and face to face social interactions (Engelberg, & Sjöberg, 2004). Studies have found that adolescents who are using the anonymity of social networking media to display purposeful misrepresentation of themselves are placing themselves at risk for social well being (Harman, Hansen, Cochran, & Lindsey, 2005). Often, adolescents who have underdeveloped or deviant social skills in face to face interactions continue such behaviours during online interaction. By doing this, these adolescents continue to inhibit the development of their social competence (Chaplan, 2005). The authors stress that it was not the use of social networking media which promoted the lack of social competence skills, but that adolescents who already struggle with social competence will most likely display poor social competence no matter the means in which they communicate with others (Harman, Hansen, Cochran, & Lindsey, 2005).

The results from these studies support a lack of development in each of the levels of Rose-Krasnor's (1997) prism of social competence. Each of these studies demonstrate that adolescents who already possess poor social competence will continue to do so while using social networking media to interact with others. That an underdeveloped sense of emotional skills, lack a sense of interconnectedness by focusing on their own personal needs, and employing a passive aggressive style when attempting to solve a social relationship problem will not aid in the development of social competence.

Future Research

Research demonstrates that social networking media can have both a positive and negative influence on adolescent social competence. There are a wide range of variables which can influence how an adolescent will use social networking media to advance or inhibit their social competence development. Researchers are currently investigating how age, gender, mental, emotional, and behavioural health, family relationships and stresses, as well as purpose of social media use, affect adolescent social competence.

Conclusion

Since the introduction of the telegraph and landline telephone, technology has changed the way we interact and communicate with each other (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social networking media can have both a positive and negative influence on adolescent's social competence development. Some studies have indicated that social networking media doesn't necessarily influence social competence, but enhances already developed social skills an individual already has, or provides an avenue for those lacking in social competence to continue to practice poor social skills. The use of an adapted bio-ecological systems model, which includes the impact of technology on child development, may assist in future examination of how social networking media influence on adolescent social competence development.

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