

Which Relationship Skills Count Most? Measuring and Ranking Relationship Competencies

Robert Epstein, Ph.D.^a and Rachel Smith^b

^aAmerican Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology
repstein@post.harvard.edu

^bChapman University
smith261@mail.chapman.edu

Abstract

In an Internet study with an ethnically diverse sample of over 11,700 subjects from the U.S. and 50 other countries (mean age 33.3), a seven-scale test of relationship skills was found to be both a reliable and valid measuring instrument, and relationship competencies were ranked according to how well they predicted desirable, self-reported outcomes.

Each competency was derived from empirical studies showing that such competencies are associated with better outcomes in relationships, and content validity was established in a double-blind procedure with seven relationship experts. The competencies were: Communication, Conflict Resolution, Self Management, Stress Management, Knowledge of Partner, Sex & Romance, and Life Skills.

Each scale consisted of 10 items (5-point Likert scale, agree/disagree), and the 70 test items were presented in random order. A typical item for the Communication scale was, "I am comfortable talking about my feelings with my partner." Demographic questions were also asked, along with criterion questions for validation purposes, such as, "On average, how long have your romantic relationships lasted?"

No effect was found for sexual orientation, and small effects were found for age and education level. A large effect was found for race/ethnicity, with Hispanics outscoring all other groups. Effects were also found for gender, with females outscoring males overall and also on most competencies.

Criterion validity was suggested by several findings, among them: (1) Total score was substantially higher for people who had had relationship skills training and was positively correlated with the number of hours of training people had had. (2) Total score for people who were or had been married was higher than for people who had never been married. (3) Total score was a good predictor of level of satisfaction in one's current relationship, of overall satisfaction in relationships, and of average relationship length. The predictive power of the seven subscales, assessed through regression analyses, varied according to the criterion variable being predicted. For example, Communication, followed by Knowledge of Partner, were strong predictors of satisfaction in one's current relationship; however, Knowledge of Partner was a stronger predictor of satisfaction in relationships over time.