Initial validation of a measure of self-efficacy in romantic relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the psychometric properties of a self-report measure of self-efficacy in romantic relationships (SERR). Analyses (with 775 undergraduates) indicated a coherent factor structure representing broad beliefs about task demands in romantic relationships and abilities to meet such demands. SERR scores predict relationship anxiety and expectations of relationship success when demographic characteristics, current romantic relationship status, general self-efficacy, and social self-efficacy are considered. The SERR assesses broad feelings of relationship self-efficacy, independent of specific relationships or partners, important for understanding individual-level relationship expectations, behaviors, and interventions.

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1. Introduction

Much research supports the importance of self-efficacy, "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3), in affecting motivation, effort, and persistence. Broadly, self-efficacy involves expectations that outcomes can be achieved through actions. Such beliefs affect behavior and expectations of how well one will perform (Bandura, 1997). Self-reports of general self-efficacy are positively associated with interpersonal competence, feelings of personal control, self-esteem, and coping ability (Bandura, 1997). With researchers increasingly interested in cognitions in interpersonal relationships (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996), efficacy beliefs in intimate relationships have been examined, specifically beliefs about one's ability to resolve conflicts with a relationship partner (Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000); and one's ability to engage in specific, positive relationship behaviors (Lopez, Morúa, & Rice, 2007). However, few studies have examined broader self-perceptions of capabilities to meet task demands within romantic relationships that are not tied to a specific relationship or specific partner, despite the view that beliefs about self-competence in relationships are enduring dispositions that influence adaptive interactions and affect relationship success (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998). Based on the argument that self-efficacy involves beliefs about capabilities within particular domains (Bandura, 1997), this study involves construction and initial validation of a self-report measure of self-efficacy in romantic relationships.

Theorists view self-efficacy as evolving over time, with normative social events influential for development of psychological processes involved in individual agency (Bandura, 1997). Direct experiences are the most important information source concerning one's abilities (Bandura, 1997), for performance of specific tasks and broader domain self-efficacy, which theorists argue is based on a large sampling of life events and information from varieties of related experiences (Woodruff & Cashman, 1993). A broad assessment of self-efficacy in romantic relationships involves capturing self-perceptions of relationship capabilities as they have occurred and developed across relationships; and assessing such self-perceptions independent of particular relationships or partners. One's abilities to resolve conflicts within relationships and engage in positive relationship behaviors are somewhat dependent on qualities and behaviors of partners (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992); judgments of self-efficacy vary depending on context and targets of behavior (Bandura, 1997). However, self-efficacy is not only based on or reflective of "specific behaviors within specific situations" (Bandura, 1997, p. 49), but perceived capabilities within the same activity domain across conditions sharing common features. An "intermediate" level self-report measure of self-efficacy in romantic relationships reflecting beliefs about one's capabilities as a relationship partner (in positive and negative terms), independent of a specific relationship, is not currently available. Such a measure may be especially useful in examining individual behaviors that occur repeatedly across relationships and relationship-oriented

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behaviors that occur outside of relationships, including relationship-seeking.

Self-efficacy judgments are partly based on self-attributions (Cast & Burke, 2002), with successful performance and outcomes attributed to stable qualities of the self resulting in feelings of mastery (Bandura, 1982), and greater expectations of future success (Weiner, 1986). Broad judgments of one's capabilities in romantic relationships are based on multiple experiences, with attributions for relationship outcomes made to the self over time influencing and interacting with such judgments (Collins & Allard, 2001). Romantic relationship experiences also inform judgments of task demands within relationships and one's abilities to respond effectively to such demands (Bandura, 1997). Although efficacy expectations (as self-attributions) have been investigated in intimate relationships, and researchers have argued that efficacy should be more fully incorporated into cognitive models of intimate relationships (Fincham et al., 2000), few measures have been developed and all are dependent on experiences with specific partners. If self-efficacy in romantic relationships is based on overall assessment of typical difficulty involved in relationships for oneself, it is less dependent on behaviors of specific others, because it is developed based on experiences across time and central to self-referent processes across similar situations (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura (1997) clearly asserts that self-efficacy judgments are predictive of intentions, behaviors, and adaptations to the environment. In romantic relationships, self-efficacy beliefs are played out in behaviors and interactions with partners, which then predict relationship quality and longevity. Several studies indicate relations between positive reports of self-efficacy within a particular relationship and positive outcomes. Using an unpublished measure assessing beliefs in one's ability to resolve conflicts with a specific partner (Bradbury, 1989), Fincham et al. (2000) found that greater efficacy expectations are related to more positive attributions about partner behaviors and greater satisfaction among married couples over time. Using the same measure, Cui et al. (2008) found that efficacy beliefs about resolving conflicts are related to less relationship conflict, which is related to greater satisfaction. Fincham and Bradbury (1987) found that efficacy beliefs about resolving conflicts are related to persistence in solving problems in relationships. Using a "relationship-specific" (p. 81) measure assessing individual confidence in ability to engage in "specific relationship maintenance behaviors" (p. 83), Lopez et al. (2007) found that such judgments predict relationship satisfaction among college students over time. Although these findings support that efficacy judgments concerning specific relationship behaviors in interaction with a specific partner are linked to relationship outcomes, there is little evidence on how broad beliefs about one's abilities as a romantic partner that are not dependent on a specific relationship or partner relate to relationship outcomes and beliefs.

Bandura (1997) asserts that self-efficacy is multifaceted, involving interrelated beliefs about ability to attain goals and self-regulation capacity under typical and trying conditions. Bandura identifies task demands as influential for self-efficacy within particular domains; judgments of self-efficacy depend partly on perceptions of challenges to successful performance. Because broad beliefs about self-regulatory capabilities are related to self-efficacy across different situations within a given domain (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994), it is important to address self-referent beliefs about capabilities in romantic relationships that are independent of specific partners. Broad beliefs about one's abilities to attain positive relationships and energize behavior when difficulties arise seem especially important in understanding and treating individual difficulties in forming, maintaining, and committing to intimate relationships, and understanding problems that individuals experience across different relationships.

1.1. The current study

This study involves initial validation of a self-report measure of self-efficacy in romantic relationships (self-efficacy in romantic relationships; SERR), and relations with relationship anxiety, expectations of relationship success, and other self-efficacy beliefs. We designed the SERR as a measure of broad perceptions of one's capabilities to effectively act in response to task demands in romantic relationships, reflecting an "intermediate" analysis of self-efficacy within a particular domain (Bandura, 1997, p. 49).

Overall reliability and validity analyses are based on responses of 775 undergraduate students. A subsample completed items assessing general expectations of relationship success, general and social self-efficacy, and relationship anxiety.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Undergraduate students [$N = 775$, M age = 23.5 years ($SD = 5.9$), 595 women, 179 men][1] from a state university in southern California participated for required research or extra credit (from 2007 to 2010). We recruited participants through Participant Pool announcements and upper-division courses. Most participants were Hispanic/Latino (49.5%) (11% Euro-American, 20% Asian-American, 7% African-American, 12% other); 10% were married (87% single, 3% divorced). Of participants reporting current involvement in romantic relationships ($n = 558$), 416 reported current involvement. Four hundred, seven participants reported experiencing at least one "serious" romantic relationship (362 missing). Of 505 participants reporting "sex of people you typically date," 27 reported same-sex or both sex partners.[2]

2.2. Item generation

Two authors generated 50 items focused on abilities to attain positive relationship outcomes, to expend effort in relationships, perceptions of relationships as difficult, and beliefs about how personal capabilities affect relationship problems. Respondents indicated degree of agreement using 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *neither agree/disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*. Several items were adapted from the *General Self-Efficacy Scale* (Sherer et al., 1982) to directly involve romantic relationships. The two authors and a third judge (with scale development expertise) unanimously agreed to eliminate 17 items as not directly related to relationship self-beliefs, or involving perceptions of relationships as difficult (see Table 1).

2.3. Measures

Four hundred, seven participants completed the *General Self-efficacy Scale* (Sherer et al., 1982), 17 items assessing willingness to initiate action, expend effort, and persist (e.g., "I give up easily;" $\alpha = .89$). Six items assess *social self-efficacy* (e.g., "It is difficult for me to make new friends;" $\alpha = .52$) (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*). Participants completed the Anxiety Subscale of the *Relationship Awareness Scale* (RAS-A; Snell, 1998), nine items assessing feelings of anxiety and discomfort in relationships (e.g., "I am somewhat awkward and tense in close relationships;" $\alpha = .93$, 58 missing); and three items assessing likelihood of experiencing a happy or unhappy marriage, and divorce (*general expectations of relationship success*; 1 = *very unlikely*, 9 = *very likely*; $\alpha = .75$).

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[1] One case failed to report sex; 64 participants with missing data were excluded.
[2] No scores vary by sexual orientation.