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AUTHOR Roberts, William L.
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ABSTRACT

Stress and social networks have been proposed as important determinants of parenting. In addition, parental social networks have been thought to influence child outcomes directly. Few studies, however, have examined all three areas concurrently. In the present study, which focused on the associations between parenting and children's competence in preschool, mothers and fathers in 30 families reported on stressful life events and social networks. Family interactions were assessed by home observations, observer ratings, and parent self-reports. Children's competence in preschool was assessed by teacher ratings. Findings indicated that losses (by death) were associated across methods with decreased warmth and increased control among parents. Correlations suggested that the developing social abilities of children 3 to 5.8 years of age may influence the composition of their mothers' social networks. Only a few aspects of parenting were consistently related to social network variables. Kin social support appeared to buffer the effects of stress; however, contrary findings emerged for support from friends, especially fathers' friends. Partial correlational analyses were consistent with the view that the effects of parental stress on child behavior are mediated by parent-child interactions, while social networks influence children directly, and strongly. References and data tables are appended. (Author/RH)

# Parental Stress and Social Networks:

# Relations with Parenting and Children's Competence

William L. Roberts

Simon Fraser University

Delivered at meetings of the Canadian Psychological Association,

Toronto, June 1986

Abstract

Both stress and social networks have been proposed as important determinants of parenting. In addition, parental social networks have been thought to influence child outcomes directly. Few studies, however, have examined all three areas concurrently. In the present study, which focused on the associations between parenting and children's competence in preschool, mothers and fathers in 30 families reported on stressful life events and social networks. Family interactions were assessed by home observations, observer ratings, and parent self reports. Children's competence in preschool was assessed by teacher ratings. Losses (by death) were associated across methods with decreased warmth and increased control. Correlations suggested that the developing social abilities of children in this age range (3-5.8 years) may influence the composition of their mothers' social networks. Only a few aspects of parenting were consistently related to social network variables. Kin social support appeared to buffer the effects of stress; however, contrary findings emerged for support from friends. Partial correlational analyses were consistent with the view that the effects of parental stress on child behavior are mediated by parent-child interactions, while social networks influence children directly, and strongly.

## Stress

Stress is an ambiguous concept, and research is correspondingly difficult. Rutter (1981), for example, distinguishes four basic meanings: the stressful event itself, a force that deforms, emotional distress, and a physiological reaction. The concept of a stressful life event is also complex in itself. Such events may be acute (e.g., accidents) or chronic (e.g., unemployment), major (bereavement) or minor, long-lasting (divorce) or brief, controllable or uncontrollable, pleasant or unpleasant. These distinctions seem to be linked to variations in individual reactions to these events and to their long-term sequelae.

One strategy for coping with this complexity is to break down stressful life events into empirically meaningful categories, rather than treating stress as a global concept. Just what these categories should be, however, is not clear. Rutter (1981) suggests that events entailing loss, disappointments, and disturbed interpersonal relationships, among others, should be distinguished. Such an approach was followed here.

Each parent completed the Long Form of the Horowitz Life Events Inventory (Horowitz, Schaefer, Hiroto, Wilner, & Levin, 1977). (133 items are checked across 5 time periods, from "within 1 month" to "over 2 years".) Following Rutter (1981), these events were grouped into nine separate categories by content, plus a tenth residual category.

These categories of stressful events were:

1. Loss (death), e.g., "death of your mother or father";
2. Separation, e.g., "a move of your home to another town, province, or country";
3. Discord During Childhood, e.g., "intense arguments between your parents or other family members";
4. Troubled Relationships, e.g.,"a 'falling out' of a close friendship";
5. Disappointments, e.g.,"failing an important examination";
6. Enduring Changes, e.g.,"birth or adoption of a child";
7. Fearful Experiences, e.g.,"witnessing violence";
8. Physically Noxious, e.g.,"major dental work";
9. Emotional Distress, e.g.,"feeling sad for more than three days".

## Social Networks

Social networks are also conceptually complex (Cochrane & Brassard, 1979). Three different dimensions are usually specified: structure (e.g., size, interconnectedness of members), location in time and space (geographical distribution, frequency of contact), and activities (types of support or services exchanged).

In addition, it has been suggested that social support from spouses, relatives, and friends (non-kin) may be distinct in terms of relations to parenting and child outcomes. In the

present study, all these aspects of social networks were assessed, using Tietjen's (1978) Social Networks Questionnaire, a self report instrument that requests information "about the people who are most important to you".

## Parenting

Two fundamental, if complex, dimensions of parenting have emerged in past research (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). The first is warmth, which includes both affection and behavioral responsiveness. Parental responsiveness to child social cues has been linked to secure attachments in infancy and to later social and task competencies. Control, which includes restrictiveness and the assertion of power to obtain compliance, has also been identified as an important determinant of children's abilities and competence.

In the present study each dimension of parenting was assessed across methods.

1. Home Observations: One session lasting from supper time until the child's bed time. Initiator and target individuals as well as behaviors were recorded. A focal individual sampling procedure was used, with 10-minute samples alternating between the child and each parent.

2. Observer Ratings: Following the observation session, 46 Parent Rating Scales (Baumrind, 1971) were completed by the observer.

3. Self Reports: Block's Child Rearing Practices Q-Sort was completed by each parent. The variables derived from these measures are listed on Table 1.

## Competence

There is a consensus in the research literature that for young children, competence (or the ability to meet the demands imposed by the situation) entails the ability to set and achieve goals, to be planful, and to initiate and sustain positive social interactions and cooperative, coordinated behavior with peers and adults (Roberts, in press).

Competence was assessed by having each child's day care teacher complete the Preschool Behavior Q-Sort (Baumrind, 1968). From this, four scales were derived from Baumrind (1971) and two from Waters, Wippman, and Sroufe (1979). (See Table 1.) Finally, a criterion Q-sort for competence was developed and each child's Q-Sort correlated with this criterion as a measure of overall competence.

## Methods

Each family was seen four times. Questionnaires on parenting, stress, and social networks (as specified above) were dropped off and picked up on the first two visits. Home observations comprised the third visit, while additional child measures, reported elsewhere, were administered during the

fourth.

## Results

### Demographic trends

Among the 30 families who completed the study, there were 19 girls and 11 boys. Their average age was 4.3 years (range, 3.0 to 5.8). Parents tended to be well educated (mothers reported an average of 14 years of school, fathers, 16), financially comfortable (mean family income was slightly above the national average), and middle class (the Duncan Socio-Economic Index averaged 61 for fathers, 56 for mothers).

### Stress

In general, levels of stress seemed moderate to low, with Troubled Relationships, Enduring Changes, and Emotional Distress the most commonly reported types of events (see Table 2).

### Social Networks

Parents reported fairly large and active social networks, with friends out-numbering kin. Only one sex-of-parent difference was found: Fathers very rarely reported receiving emotional support from their kin (see Table 3).

Mothers of older children reported having more friends ($r$=.52***). Specifically, these mothers reported more friends within walking distance ($r$=.46**), more friends who baby sat for them ($r$=.41**) and more friends who provided emotional support ($r$=.41**). Thus it appears that children's increasing social

**$p$<.05; ***$p$<.01

abilities may have an influence on the composition of their mother's social network.

Parenting

Parents were on average warm, responsive and moderately controlling, as shown in Table 4. While observed rates of parental firmness following noncompliance were low, rates of initial child compliance were fairly high (fathers averaged 50.2%, mothers, 56.9%).

Child Competence

In light of these trends in parenting, it is not surprising that the children in this sample generally did well on measures of competence (Table 5).

In order to simplify the presentation of results, the seven Q-sort measures of competence (see Table 1) were grouped on the basis of a cluster analysis and aggregated using Z-scores. As illustrated in Figure 1, the cluster analysis yielded two groups. The first, General Competence, contained the correlation to the criterion sorting, Baumrind's scale Purposive, and the scales developed by Waters et al., Ego Strength and Peer Competence. The second group, Cooperative-Task Oriented, contained Baumrind's scales Friendly, Cooperative, and Achievement Oriented.

Stress and parenting

The strongest correlations were shown by death. Losses were associated across methods with less warmth and more control.

Maternal disappointments, separations, and emotional distress were also associated with parenting, although less consistently. See Table 6.

Social networks and parenting

Only two consistent relations emerged. (1) Kin involvement was associated with greater observed firmness in fathers. This included number of kin providing information on child rearing ($r$=.55*** for father's kin, .36** for mother's) and on goods and services ($r$=.54*** for father's kin, .52*** for mother's) and number of mother's kin providing household help ($r$=.38**) and baby sitting ($r$=.44**).

(2) A large and active network of friends for fathers was associated with lower levels of the self report variable Mother Warm. This held for total friends ($r$=-.46**), same-sex friends ($r$=-.47***), friends in the metropolitan area ($r$=-.50***), friends seen at least once a week ($r$=-.40**), and friends providing emotional support ($r$=-.51***).

Does social support buffer the effects of stress?

The data in the present sample indicate that support from kin did buffer the effects of stress. As Table 7 shows, the relations between parenting and maternal Losses are generally weaker in a group receiving emotional support from maternal kin than they are in a group receiving no emotional support. Patterns similar to the one in Table 7 were found for other kin variables

**$p$<.05; ***$p$<.01

(e.g., baby sitting by mothers' and fathers' kin, number of mothers' kin in metropolitan area).

However, contrary results were found for variables assessing support from friends, especially father's friends. Here, greater support resulted in stronger negative relations between maternal Losses and parenting.

Stress, social networks, and competence

Partial correlation analyses were consistent with the idea that the effects of parental stress on children's behavior are mediated by parenting. For example, maternal Losses were significantly correlated with General Competence ($r$=-.57***). When Mother Warm was partialled from General Competence, however, the correlation of Losses was only -.16 ($Z$=1.79**). Put another way, before partialling, maternal Losses accounted for 32% of the variance in General Competence; after partialling, for only 3%. (The corresponding correlations for Cooperative-Task Oriented are -.26 and -.03).

Baby sitting by kin and friends and emotional support by husband were all significantly related to children's scores on Cooperative-Task Oriented. When these five variables were entered into a stepwise multiple regression analysis, the most important predictors of Cooperative-Task Oriented were baby sitting by father's and mother's kin and emotional support from husband (standard regression coefficients were -.38, .40, and .31,

**$p$<.05; ***$p$<.01

respectively), accounting for 51% of the variance. Their strength was not affected by partialling parenting variables from Cooperative-Task Oriented. In a second stepwise regression, baby sitting by mothers' and fathers' kin, and emotional support from husband (standard regression coefficients were .25, -.38, and .53, respectively) accounted for 69% of the variance in the residuals.

## Discussion

These findings contribute basic descriptive data on parental social networks-- data that are as yet sparse. The importance of such descriptive data is illustrated by the fact that the networks described in this Canadian sample are much larger than those reported by Tietjen (1978) for Swedish families, implying that social networks may be influenced by cultural as well as by other factors.

These findings support and extend the suggestion made by Bronfenbrenner et al. (1984) that kin and non-kin may function differently in social networks. For instance, in the current study kin were often included as "important persons" even when they were distant geographically. Friends, in contrast, tended to be local.

Current findings suggest other differences that may prove important in future research. For instance, the fact that mothers reported receiving emotional support from kin while fathers rarely did so suggests that kin may play different roles

depending on parental gender, with fathers experiencing kin involvement as less positive. The negative association between paternal kin involvement in child care and child competence also points to functional differences in maternal and paternal kin.

The associations between children's age and maternal friends suggest that child characteristics and parental social networks influence each other bidirectionally. Children's developing social skills and spontaneous play relationships may bring mothers into contact with neighbors who also have young children. On the other hand, as children grow older, parents may deliberately arrange peer play experiences for their children, utilizing the resources available to them in their network of acquaintances and friends.

The partial correlation analyses, as noted earlier, were consistent with the view that the effects of parental stress on children are mediated largely by parental behavior, while the effects of social networks are direct. The present research suggests that some aspects of social networks may have substantial associations with child behavior, and that measures of parental social networks merit inclusion in studies of the determinants of children's competence.

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Table 1.

Methods, Instruments, and Variables for Family and Classroom Measures

| Method/Instrument | Variable | Comments |
|---|---|---|
| **Family Measures:** | | |
| Home observations: real-time coding using focal-individual sampling | Warmth: Father Responsive; Mother Responsive | lag analyses: responses to child social initiations and responses to noncompliance. |
| | Control: Father Firm; Mother Firm | |
| Observer Ratings: Parent Rating Scales (Baumrind, 1970a,b) | Warmth: Warm Responsive | Parents rated jointly on all scales. Variables derived from Baumrind (1971) |
| | Control: Firm Directive | |
| Self report: Child Rearing Practices Q-Sort | Warmth: Father Warm; Mother Warm | All scales assembled |

(table continues)

| Method/Instrument | Variable | Comments |
|---|---|---|
| (Block, 1965) | Control: | rationally |
| | Father Strict | and tested |
| | Mother Strict | empirically; |
| | | item-total |
| | | rs > .40. |
| Classroom measures: | | |
| Teacher Ratings: | | |
| Preschool | Competence: | |
| Behavior | Purposive | First four from |
| Q-Sort | Friendly | Baumrind (1971) |
| (Baumrind, 1971) | Cooperative | |
| | Achievement Oriented | |
| | Ego Strength | From Waters et |
| | Peer Competence | al. (1979). |
| | r to criterion | |
| | sort | |

Table 2.

Stressful Life Events: Descriptive Statistics

| Variable | Mean | S.D. | Range |
|---|---|---|---|
| Loss (7 items) | 1.1 | 1.1 | 0-4 |
| Disappointments (6 items) | 1.3 | 1.4 | 0-6 |
| Troubled Relationships (17 items) | 8.2 | 5.3 | 0-24 |
| Separations (8 items) | 2.8 | 1.9 | 0-7 |
| Enduring Changes (20 items) | 9.8 | 4.3 | 0-26 |
| Fearful Events (4 items) | 1.0 | 1.1 | 0-4 |
| Physically Noxious (4 items) | 2.7 | 2.0 | 0-8 |
| Emotional Distress (18 items) | 11.1 | 8.8 | 0-41 |
| Childhood Family Discord (5 items) | 1.3 | 1.2 | 0-6 |
| Other Events (52 items) | 20.0 | 9.1 | 2-42 |

Note: Maximum scores can exceed total items because of multiple time periods.

Table 3.

Social Networks: Descriptive Statistics

| Variable | Mean | S.D. | Range |
|---|---|---|---|
| Structure: | | | |
| Total kin | 5.0 | 3.5 | 0-12 |
| Total friends | 7.2 | 4.1 | 0-20 |
| % same-sex friends | 66.4% | 21.3 | 0-100 |
| % interconnectedness (friends) | 30.3% | 29.3 | 0-100 |
| Frequency of Contact | | | |
| Seen at least once a week: | | | |
| Kin (total) | .8 | 1.4 | 0-5 |
| Friends (total) | 3.4 | 2.7 | 0-14 |
| Seen "2 or 3 times a month": | | | |
| Kin (total) | .8 | 1 4 | 0-5 |
| Friends (total) | 1.6 | 1.8 | 0-6 |
| Location: | | | |
| Living in metropolitan area: | | | |
| Kin (total) | 2.3 | 1.6 | 0-10 |
| Friends (total) | 6.1 | 2.4 | 0-12 |
| Living beyond metropolitan area: | | | |
| Kin (total) | 2.2 | 2.3 | 0-10 |
| Friends (total) | 1.0 | 1.4 | 0-7 |

(table continues)

| Variable | Mean | S.D. | Range |
|---|---|---|---|
| Activities and Services (provided at least once/month): | | | |
| Child rearing information: | | | |
| Kin (total) | .6 | 1.1 | 0-6 |
| Friends (total) | 1.6 | 2.3 | 0-11 |
| Information on goods & services: | | | |
| Kin (total) | .7 | 1.2 | 0-4 |
| Friends (total) | 1.9 | 2.1 | 0-11 |
| Household help: | | | |
| Kin (total) | .7 | 1.2 | 0-5 |
| Friends (total) | 1.1 | 1.5 | 0-5 |
| Baby sitting: | | | |
| Kin (total) | .6 | 1.0 | 0-4 |
| Friends (total) | .9 | 1.3 | 0-5 |
| Affective Factors: | | | |
| Emotional support (at least once/month): | | | |
| Kin (total) | | see Note | |
| Friends (total) | 1.8 | 2.6 | 0-14 |
| Balanced relationship: | | | |
| Kin (total) | 4.1 | 3.1 | 0-11 |
| Friends (total) | 5.8 | 3.6 | 0-13 |

Note: For Emotional Support From Kin, mean for mothers= 1.0, mean for fathers= .07, $t(31.1) = -3.77$, $p < .001$.

Table 4.

Parenting Measures: Means and Standard Deviations

| Variable | Mean | S.D. |
|---|---|---|
| Home observation (percent probabilities) | | |
| Warmth: | | |
| Father Responsive | 8.5 | 8.6 |
| Mother Responsive | 8.7 | 6.6 |
| Control: | | |
| Father Firm | 18.4 | 16.6 |
| Mother Firm | 22.8 | 18.9 |
| Observer ratings (% of scale total) | | |
| Warmth: | | |
| Warm | 63.9 | 13.0 |
| Responsive | 69.1 | 10.7 |
| Control: | | |
| Firm | 60.1 | 14.7 |
| Directive | 63.3 | 10.4 |
| Self report (% of scale total) | | |
| Warmth: | | |
| Father Warm | 77.4 | 13.6 |
| Mother Warm | 76.7 | 12.8 |

(table continues)

| Variable | Mean | S.D. |
|---|---|---|
| Control: | | |
| Father Strict | 48.3 | 15.8 |
| Mother Strict | 44.9 | 17.4 |

Note: For the home observation variables, values for Father Responsive and Mother Responsive indicate the probability of "ignores" following a child social initiation (values were reflected in subsequent analyses, in keeping with the variable names); values for Father Firm and Mother Firm indicate the probability of reiteration or enforcement of a directive following child non-compliance.

Table 5.

Mean Scores on Measures of Competence

| Variable | Mean | S.D. |
|---|---|---|
| Purposive (vs. Aimless) | 71.2 | 15.6 |
| Achievement Oriented | 64.6 | 18.8 |
| Friendly (vs. Hostile to Peers) | 67.9 | 18.6 |
| Cooperative (vs. Resistive with Adults) | 65.0 | 24.2 |
| Ego Strength | 68.1 | 13.0 |
| Peer Competence | 65.6 | 13.9 |
| Correlation to Criterion Q-Sort | .49 | .28 |

Note: The first four variables are derived from Baumrind (1971). Ego Strength and Peer Competence are derived from Waters et al. (1979). Scores for these variables are expressed as a percent of total possible points.

Table 6.

Stress and Parenting: Selected Correlations

| Parenting Variable | Stress Variable | r |
|---|---|---|
| Warmth: | | |
| Home Observation: | | |
| Father Responsive | Losses (Father) | -.37** |
| | Losses (Mother) | -.36** |
| Mother Responsive | Disappointments (Mother) | -.43** |
| | Fearful Events (Mother) | -.39** |
| Observer Ratings: | | |
| Warm | Losses (Mother) | -.42** |
| Responsive | Losses (Mother) | -.46** |
| Self Report: | | |
| Father Warm | Losses (Father) | -.39** |
| | Losses (Mother) | -.42** |
| | Disappointments (Mother) | -.44** |
| | Separations (Mother) | -.43** |
| Mother Warm | Losses (Mother) | -.53*** |
| | Losses (Father) | -.60**** |
| | Disappointments (Mother) | -.41** |
| | Emotional Distress (Mother) | -.40** |

(table continues)

| Parenting Variable | Stress Variable | r |
|---|---|---|
| Control: | | |
| Home Observation: | | |
| Father Firm | (all correlations ns) | |
| Mother Firm | Emotional Distress (Mother) | -.38** |
| Observer Rating: | | |
| Firm | Losses (Father) | .60**** |
| | Losses (Mother) | .52*** |
| | Separations (Mother) | .42** |
| Directive | Losses (Father) | .39** |
| Self Report: | | |
| Father Strict | (all correlations ns) | |
| Mother Strict | Losses (Mother) | .52*** |
| | Separations (Mother) | .40** |

**p<.05

***p<.01

****p<001

Table 7.

Correlations between Parenting, Competence, and Maternal Losses For Groups Reporting Some and No Emotional Support from Maternal Kin

| Variable | Maternal Kin: Emotional Support | | z |
|---|---|---|---|
| | None (N=16) | Some (N=14) | |
| Warmth: | | | |
| Home Observation: | | | |
| Father Responsive | -.72*** | .08 | 2.40*** |
| Mother Responsive | -.40 | -.33 | <1 |
| Observer Ratings: | | | |
| Warm | -.66*** | .12 | 2.23** |
| Responsive | -.70*** | .04 | 2.22** |
| Self Report: | | | |
| Father Warm | -.57** | .07 | 1.77** |
| Mother Warm | -.69*** | -.20 | 1.60* |
| Control: | | | |
| Home Observation: | | | |
| Father Firm | -.36 | .21 | 1.44* |
| Mother Firm | -.08 | -.18 | <1 |
| Observer Rating: | | | |
| Firm | .68*** | .25 | 1.38* |
| Directive | .07 | .18 | <1 |

(table continues)

| Variable | Maternal Kin: Emotional Support | | Z |
|---|---|---|---|
| | None (N=16) | Some (N=14) | |
| Self Report: | | | |
| Father Strict | .67*** | -.29 | 2.72*** |
| Mother Strict | .61** | .27 | 1.08 |
| Competence: | | | |
| General Competence | -.72*** | -.03 | 2.28** |
| Cooperative- Task Oriented | -.50* | .24 | 1.92** |

Note: Fisher's Z gives the significance of the difference between two correlations.

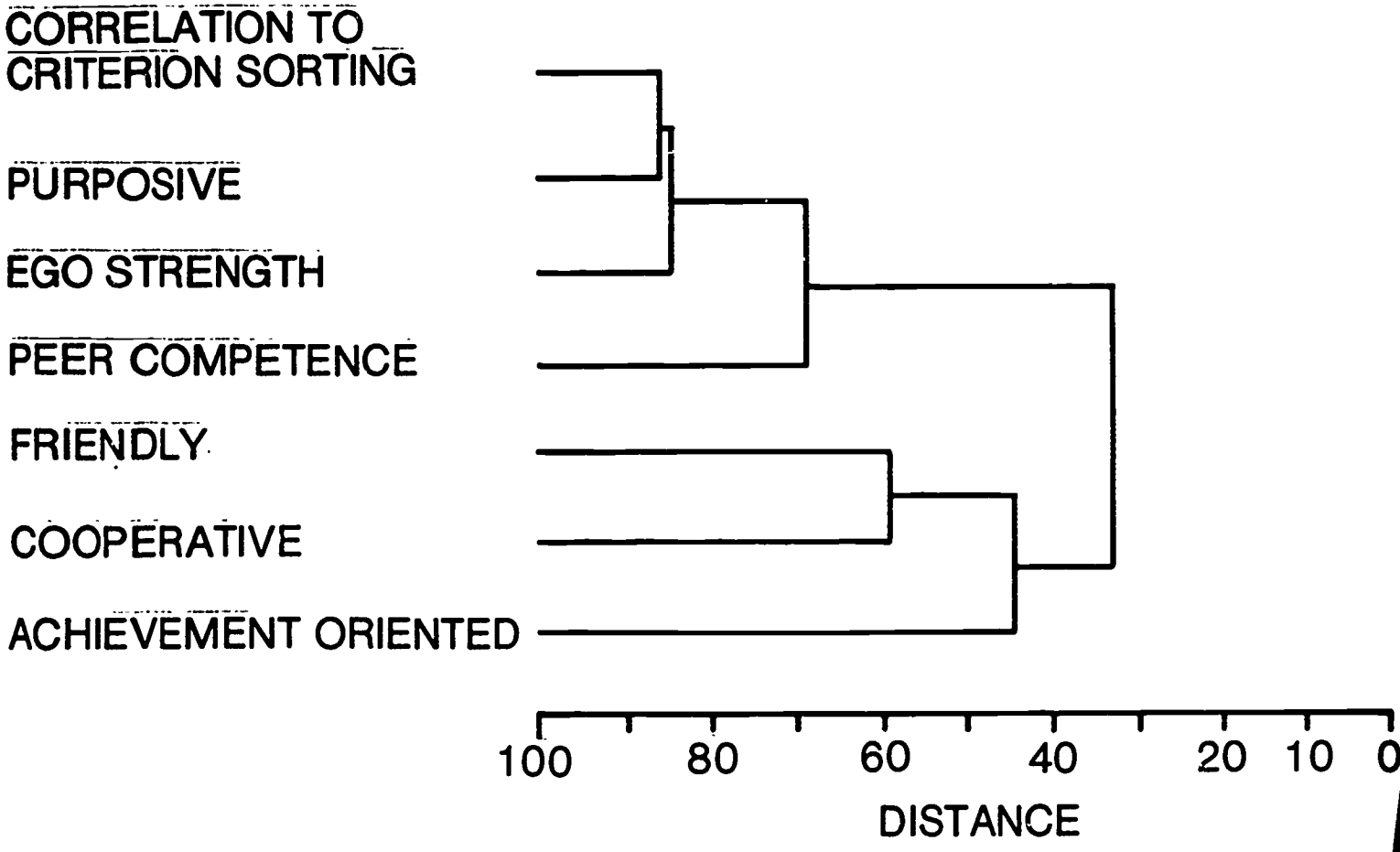
*p<.10

**p<.05

***p<.01

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Cluster analysis (complete linkage) for the Q-Sort measures of competence.




# CLUSTER ANALYSIS: COMPETENCE