

## **Patterns of Adjustment Associated with Academic Competence and Depressive Symptoms in Adolescence**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study examined patterns of adaptation associated with academic competence and depressive symptoms over time in an ethnically diverse sample of largely middle-class African- and European-American adolescents (N=1248; Maryland Adolescent Development in Contexts (MADIC)). Four waves of data were obtained from adolescents and their parents in the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades, and at age 19. Measures of adjustment included GPA, educational expectations/aspirations, academic self-concept, global self-esteem, and depressive symptoms at each wave. Our results suggest that adolescents who are depressed and struggling academically in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade may be especially vulnerable during the transition to adulthood. Low achieving and depressed 7<sup>th</sup> graders reported a decrease in academic self-concept in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade followed by a sharp increase in depressive symptoms at age 19. A possible source of such difficulties may be lack of clarity surrounding the passage to adulthood in our society.

## INTRODUCTION

The transition to adulthood is considered by most to be a normative, developmental milestone in a contemporary society. The lack of clarity and continuity surrounding this passage may pose a threat to the well-being of adolescents struggling to make sense of themselves and their worlds. Although most adolescents make the transition to adulthood relatively problem-free, others experience more difficulties as they move from high school to college or work. For those adolescents who are not doing well academically, the road to adulthood may be especially rocky. The so-called "forgotten half" of the high school population that is not bound for college may be particularly at-risk during this transition (W.T. Grant Foundation, 1988). Coupled with heightened levels of depressive symptoms, this group of "forgotten" teens may be ill prepared for life beyond high school and hence experience problems in multiple domains (e.g., mental health, achievement).

The present study investigates patterns of adaptation associated with academic competence and depressive symptoms over time in an ethnically diverse sample of largely middle-class African- and European-American adolescents. A primary aim is to examine the impact of depressive symptoms on later academic achievement and psychological well-being. Depression and other affective disorders often interfere with the mastery of age-appropriate developmental tasks (Kovacs, 1989). We expect that individuals who are depressed and who are not doing well academically might show disruptions in functioning over time.

## METHOD

### Sample/Procedure

Four waves of data were obtained from adolescents and their parents in the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades, and at age 19 (Maryland Adolescent Development in Context (MADIC); J. Eccles & A. Sameroff, Co-PIs). The sample (N=1268) is comprised of approximately equal proportions of girls and boys (2/3 African-American, 1/3 European-American) from families of comparable and largely middle-class socioeconomic circumstances.

At Wave 1, adolescents were classified into 4 groups using a mean-split on a composite measure of academic performance (i.e., GPA, California Achievement Test scores) and a cutpoint of 1 SD above the mean on depressive symptoms (CDI; Kovacs, 1992).

### *Depressive Symptoms*

	Low	High
High	521	100
Low	563	84

## MEASURES

Measures of adjustment included adolescents' educational expectations and aspirations for the future, GPA, self-concept of academic skills, global self-esteem and depressive symptoms (CDI; Kovacs, 1992) at each time point. See sample items below.<sup>1</sup>

Educational Aspirations (single item)

How far would you like to go in school?

(1 = < 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 7 = J.D., M.D., Ph.D.)

Educational Expectations (single item)

How far will you go in school?

(1 = < 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 7 = J.D., M.D., Ph.D.)

Academic Self-Concept (4 items)

How good are you in math?

(1 = not at all good, 7 = very good)

Grade Point Average (i.e., GPA)

Global Self-Esteem (3 items)

How often do you wish you were different than you are?

(1 = almost never, 5 = almost always)

Depressive symptoms (6 items)

I am sad...

(1 = once in a while, 3 = all the time)

## RESULTS

- Repeated-measures MANOVAs using three time points from grade 8 to age 19 were performed to investigate patterns of adjustment over time.
- As shown in Figure 1, low achieving and depressed 7<sup>th</sup> graders reported a sharp increase in depressive symptoms at age 19 whereas the other groups continued to report lower levels of depressive symptoms at each wave.
- A similar pattern was observed for academic self-concept (see Figure 2).
- Decreases in educational aspirations and expectations over time were observed across all groups (see Table 1).
- No significant main effects or interactions were found for GPA or global self-esteem.

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<sup>1</sup> See earlier work by Eccles and her colleagues (e.g., Eccles & Roeser, 1998; Eccles, Wigfield, Flanagan, Miller, Reuman & Yee, 1989) for further details regarding scale items and psychometric properties.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study examined patterns of adjustment associated with academic competence and depressive symptoms over time. Our results suggest that adolescents who are depressed and struggling academically in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade may be especially vulnerable during the transition to adulthood. Relative to their peers, low achieving and depressed 7<sup>th</sup> graders reported a decrease in academic self-concept in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade followed by a sharp increase in depressive symptoms at age 19. Interestingly, academic self-concept—a domain-specific measure of self-esteem—not global self-esteem differentiated groups. One reason behind such difficulties may be the lack of clarity surrounding the passage to adulthood in our society (National Research Council, 1993). Problems achieving a sense of identity and establishing autonomy with respect to work and family may contribute to difficulties.

## REFERENCES

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Table 1. Results of repeated-measures MANOVAs (controlling for ethnicity, gender, and family income).

Construct	F	Main Effects/ Interactions
Educational Aspirations	12.21**	Wave
Educational Expectations	11.41**	Wave
Academic Performance (GPA)	.99	
Academic Self-Concept	3.61**	Wave X Group
Global Self-Esteem	1.66	
Depressive Symptoms	2.14*	Wave X Group

Note—\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 2. Group means and standard deviations.

Construct	Competent/ Depressed		Not Competent/ Depressed		Competent/ Not Depressed		Not Competent/ Not Depressed	
	8 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>
Educational Aspirations	8.19 (.97)	7.09 (1.27)	n/a	6.00 (1.97)	8.10 (1.07)	7.04 (1.05)	n/a	6.22 (1.73)
Educational Expectations	7.22 (1.74)	6.54 (1.19)	n/a	4.85 (2.06)	7.53 (1.24)	6.42 (1.27)	n/a	5.37 (1.73)
GPA	3.35 (.48)	3.10 (.58)	n/a	2.53 (.75)	3.47 (.41)	3.18 (.59)	n/a	2.51 (.76)
Academic Self-Concept	5.26 (1.26)	5.21 (1.10)	5.10 (1.14)	4.09 (1.10)	5.61 (.95)	5.39 (.99)	5.14 (1.07)	4.83 (.98)
Depressive Symptoms	1.52 (.47)	1.44 (.41)	1.42 (.46)	1.49 (.40)	1.22 (.47)	1.27 (.37)	1.28 (.36)	1.27 (.34)
Global Self-Esteem	3.35 (1.10)	3.53 (.96)	3.39 (1.06)	3.57 (.89)	3.96 (.84)	3.83 (.85)	3.74 (.97)	3.99 (.81)

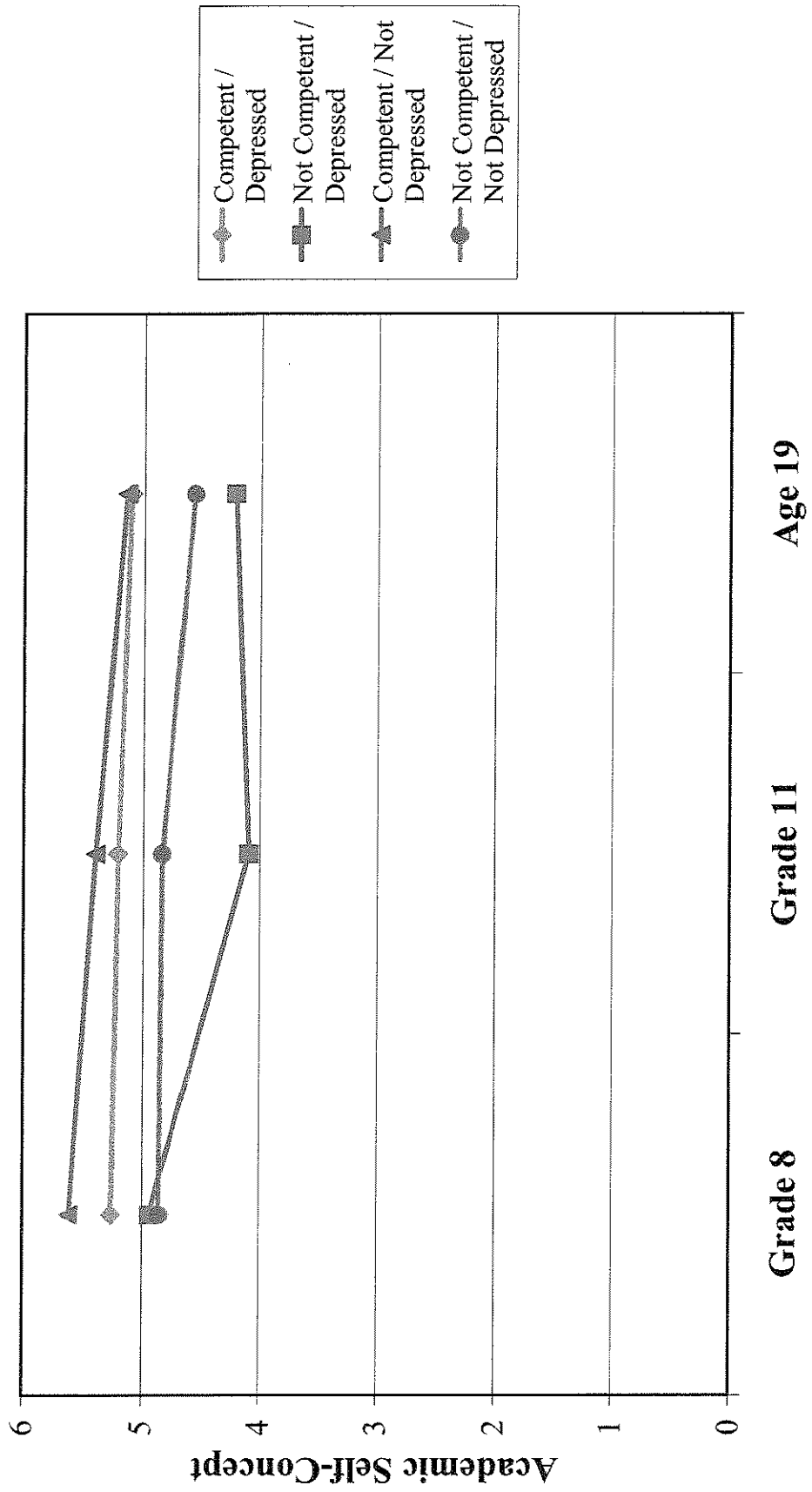
Note—\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

*Academic  
Competence*

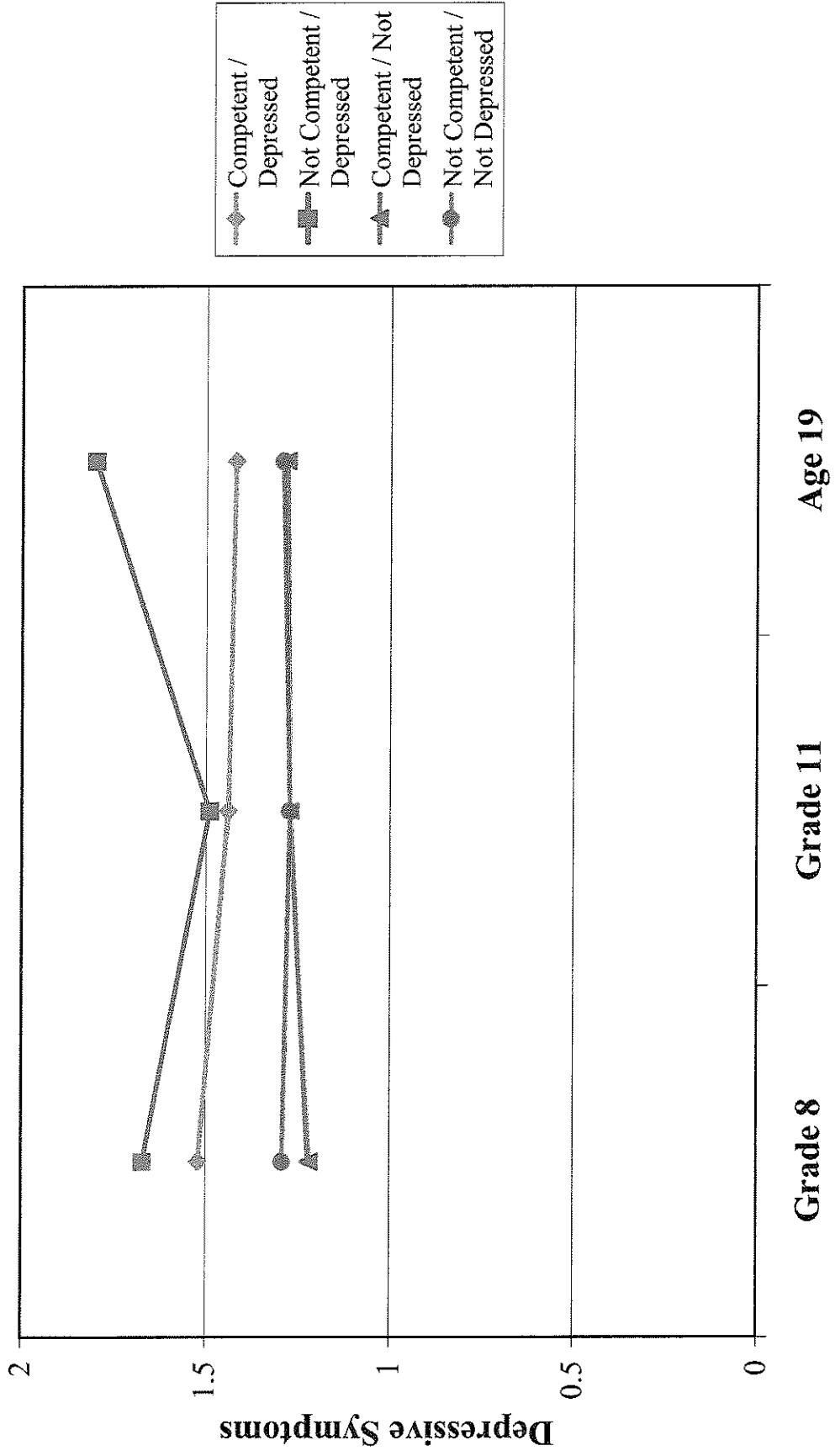
Low

High

**Figure 2. Mean Level Differences in Academic Self-Concept over Time**



**Figure 1. Mean Level Differences in Depressive Symptoms over Time**





## Loralyn Rudy

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**From:** Janice Templeton [jtemp@umich.edu]  
**Sent:** Thursday, April 26, 2001 9:42 AM  
**To:** Loralyn Rudy  
**Subject:** Re: SRCD expenses

Oh, of course not. I'm not even very good with the pieces of paper I need to keep up with.... it's not a big deal if it doesn't work out to reimburse me.

Remember I wasn't expecting anything :-).

jt

Loralyn Rudy wrote:

> Hi Janice! Do you have a receipt for the car rental?

>

> Thanks

> Lori

>

> -----Original Message-----

> From: Janice Templeton [mailto:jtemp@umich.edu]

> Sent: Thursday, April 26, 2001 9:19 AM

> To: Loralyn Rudy

> Subject: SRCD expenses

>

> Hi Lori. Here are my expenses for SRCD. Other than the receipt for the conference cost of \$65, I don't have receipts as I thought I would be paying. Anything you can reimburse me for would be great, but I won't get up my hopes either. Here's the list of expenses:

>

> Thur lunch and Dinner: \$20

> Fri Breakfast and Lunch: \$10

> Fri lab dinner: \$25

> Sat Breakfast and Lunch: \$10

>

> Car rental for Fri and Sat (in lieu of hotel room - I stayed with a friend and needed transportation): \$30/day = \$60

>

> That's the list of everything, so please modify the list as needed.

>

> Thanks,

> janice

>

> PS- I'll be going with Jacque to the Child Trends meeting in June.

Maybe

> she was thinking of using the money to pay for that tripas well????

Just

> a heads up in case you didn't know about that trip.

>

> --

> Janice Templeton

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