

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ADOLESCENTS' PHYSICAL SELF -PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

Purpose. This study examines the gender differences on adolescents' physical self-perceptions.

Methods. The participants were 594 high school students who filled in Ecklund et al.'s CY-PSPP (1996).

Results. Girls reported lower levels of physical self-worth, global self-worth and its sub-domains than boys.

Conclusions. These results can inform the design of programs addressed to adolescents' involve in sport.

Key words: Self-perceptions, gender difference, physical self-worth.

Purpose

Some studies (Eklund, Whitehead, & Welk, 1997) suggested that there has been a need of better understanding of self-perceptions in the physical domain. This is quite surprising given the robust links between physical self-perceptions, such as physical self-esteem and self-concept, and facets of physical fitness, participation in physical activity and overall mental health .

The increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity poses a global health problem. Special concern is focused on overweight during youth since it cause negative impact on health both during childhood, adolescence and later life. As perceived competence theory suggests, perceptions that the children hold of themselves may be important motivational influences for current and future physical activity (Biddle et al. 1993). Through the study of self-perception, important findings for the motivational determinants of physical activity in adolescents can be explored. The possession of positive feelings of self-worth or high self-esteem has been considered important, not only as an index of mental well-being but also as a mediator of behavior (Fox 1988). Research shows that the self-esteem is associated with positive achievements and socially

related behaviors such as leadership ability, satisfaction, decreased anxiety, and improved academic and physical performance (Hayes et al. 1999). Such research has highlighted the importance of self-esteem in physical education and exercise programs (Biddle et al. 1993). Self-worth is a fundamental contributor to human behavior. Once thought to be a unidimensional construct, self-worth is now seen as a multifaceted, multidimensional, hierarchical structure with many different domains and sub-domains.

Physical self-worth is thought to be a powerful and strong domain within the hierarchal structure of global self-worth. Fox and Corbin (1989) developed the Physical Self-Perception Profile (PSPP) based on the hierarchical model and measures physical self-perception and its relationship to overall global self-worth. The PSPP is both hierarchal and multidimensional with global self-worth (GSW) at the apex of the hierarchal structure and physical self-worth (PSW) at the domain level with (a) skill, (b) body attractiveness, (c) fitness and conditioning, and (d) physical strength as sub-domains.

The PSPP was tested on youth, adolescents and college students and found valid and reliable in testing physical self-perception (Welk et al., 1997). Later, Ecklund,

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Whitehead, & Welk, (1997) modified and validated the PSPP for its use with children and youth (CY-PSPP) as young between nine years and high school age.

A few number of investigations have analysed the differences in physical self-concept related to gender and the different levels of physical activity involvement. This investigations show that males have

Methods

Participants

594 high school students (age range = 17-18 years), from eight high school from city of Cluj were asked to volunteer their participation in this study. 279 were girls and 315 were boys. Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the school manager, participants and their parent with signed informed ascent letters prior to any data collection.

Instrument

The CY-PSPP includes scales to address perceptions of Physical Conditioning (Cond), Sports Competence (Sport), Body Attractiveness (Body) and Strength (Strong) as well as scales to assess Physical Self Worth (PSW) and Self-Esteem (SE). Each scale is assessed with six items scored on a four-point scale with the average score used to represent the value for the scale. Respondents are first asked to decide which side of a contrasting description is most like them (e.g., some kids are pleased with the appearance of their bodies BUT Other kids wish that their bodies looked in better shape physically.). All of the items use a structured alternative format to reduce the tendencies for socially desirable responses and approximately half of the items were reverse coded to keep the instrument more interesting for participants. The CY-PSPP was administered by the researchers during physical education classes. Participants were told to answer each question as best they could and to choose the statement that best described them. There were no right or wrong answers and questionnaires would not be graded. Before the questionnaire was handed out to all participants were guided through a practice question to prevent questionnaires from being filled out incorrectly. For

higher perceptions of physical self-worth (Marsh, 1997; Whitehead and Corbin, 1997), The objective of this investigation was to analyse the effects of gender on the physical self-perceptions of Romanian adolescents.

Our hypothesis was that males would present higher levels of physical self-perception than females.

assuring confidentiality we placed a number code on the questionnaire of each participants. Participants were free to ask questions about the questionnaire at any stage. The researcher then examined each questionnaire to be sure it was completed with the age, gender, and grade filled in correctly. Questionnaires not filled out correctly were then removed from the study.

Design

A quantitative correlational research design was utilized. The Children and Youth Physical Self-Perception Profile (CY-PSPP, Ecklund, Whitehead, & Welk, 1997) was completed by a sample of 594 high school students (age range = 17-18 years), from city of Cluj. CY-PSPP was recently adapted to Romanian norms (Crăciun et al., 2010).

Results

The first aim of this study was to examine the effects of gender on physical self-perceptions in Romanian adolescents. The results showed that males showed better scores in physical self-perceptions than females.

The descriptive statistics of the variables measured in the presented study are included in the Table 1. From this table it can be seen that girls tended to report lower scores on the all variables related to physical self-perceptions compared to boys.

In order to identify the significance of the differences between the scores obtained by girls and boys on physical self-perceptions variables, it was conducted an independent t-test. The results of this test indicate that girls significantly report lower scores on perception of physical activity levels ($t(592) = -7.80, p < .01$), skills ($t(592) = -8.52, p < .01$), body attractiveness ($t(592) = -$

2.54, $p < .05$), physical strength ($t(592) = -7.17$, $p < .01$) compared to boys. Also, they have a lower perception of physical self-worth ($t(592) = -4.17$, $p < .01$) and global self-worth ($t(592) = -1.97$, $p < .05$). The magnitude of the differences between the means of adolescent boys and girls is reflected by Cohen's d effect size. Considering the Cohen's d conventional values for small, medium and a large effect sizes, in the present study there are small differences between adolescent girls and boys regarding the perception of their body attractiveness ($d = -.21$) and global self-worth ($d = -.16$). A medium gender difference exists in the case of physical self-worth perception ($d = -.34$), body attractiveness perception ($d = -.64$), skill perception ($d = -.70$) and physical strength perception ($d = -.59$). The gender differences on adolescents' physical self-perceptions are illustrated in Figure 1.

Further investigation is needed in order to analyse if significant differences between boys and girls is a characteristic for adolescents in general.

Conclusions

We believe that more research is required to analyse from a motivational and experimental point of view how modifying motivational climates can affect physical self-perceptions during adolescence. Many female adolescents want to be slim, since slim is regarded as beautiful. Thus, they are under greater pressure than men to lose weight. Physical appearance differs in meaning and importance for males and females; concerns surrounding body weight and shape also differ. There is a greater discrepancy between male and female regarding their perceived body size and their ideal body size (Marsh, 1997). Female adolescents are more preoccupied with physique and appearance than are those in other age groups and they are more likely to identify themselves as overweight than are males. Research has indicated that female adolescents tend to be dissatisfied with their body weight, size, and shape (Wichstrom, 1995). For example, Marsh (1997) reported that dissatisfaction with body weight and shape was highest among females aged 12 through 23 years.

This study have results with implications for health education. Health care providers need to teach female adolescents about their normal weight range and how to maintain it through appropriate diet and exercise. In addition, health care providers need to help them attain a realistic, positive perception of their weight in order to prevent depression and lowered self-esteem. Further study is needed to determine the effect of perception of a weight problem on weight control behaviors among female adolescents.

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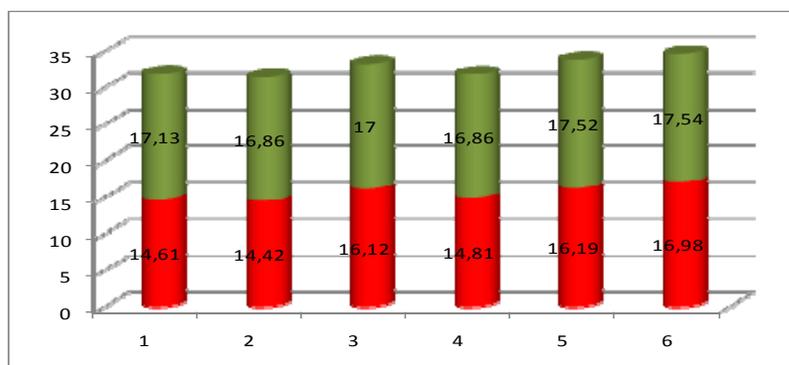
Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables related to physical self-perceptions

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Physical activity levels perception	Girls	279	14,61	3,82
	Boys	315	17,13	4,01
2. Skills perception	Girls	279	14,42	3,44
	Boys	315	16,86	3,53
3. Body attractiveness perception	Girls	279	16,12	4,54
	Boys	315	17,00	3,77
4. Physical strength perception	Girls	279	14,81	3,33
	Boys	315	16,86	3,58
5. Physical self-worth perception	Girls	279	16,19	4,03
	Boys	315	17,52	3,67
6. Global self-worth perception	Girls	279	16,98	3,41
	Boys	315	17,54	3,45

Table 2. Results of independent t-test regarding the gender differences related to physical self-perceptions

Variable	t-test	p	d
1. Physical activity levels perception	-7.80	<.01	-.64
2. Skill perception	-8.52	<.01	-.70
3. Body attractiveness perception	-2.54	<.05	-.21
4. Physical strength perception	-7.17	<.01	-.59
5. Physical self-worth perception	-4.17	<.01	-.34
6. Global self-worth perception	-1.97	<.05	-.16

Figure 1.



Legend:

- Boys

- Girls

Note: 1 – Physical activity levels perception; 2 – Skills perception; 3 – Body attractiveness perception; 4 – Physical strength perception; 5 – Physical self-worth perception; 6 - Global self-worth