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## Self-Perceptions, Self-Worth and Sport Participation in Adolescents

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The purpose of this study was to study the associations between specific self-perceptions and global self-worth with different frequency levels of sport participation among Spanish boys and girls adolescents. Students (457 boys and 460 girls) completed the Self Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985) and items assessing sport engagement from The Health Behavior in School Children Questionnaire (Wold, 1995). Results showed that some specific dimensions of self-perception were related to different frequency of sport participation whereas overall judgments of self-worth did not. Specifically, for boys and girls, higher levels of sport participation were positively associated to Athletic Competence, and for boys were also associated with Physical Appearance and Social Acceptance. The potential implications of domain specific socialisation processes on the configuration of self-perceptions are highlighted.

*Keywords:* self-perceptions, self-worth, adolescents, sport participation, gender.

El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar las relaciones entre determinadas autopercepciones y la autovalía global con diferentes niveles de frecuencia de participación deportiva en chicos y chicas adolescentes Españoles. Los estudiantes (457 chicos y 460 chicas) cumplieron el "Self Perception Profile for Children" (Harter, 1985) e ítems del "Health Behavior in School Children Questionnaire" (Wold, 1995) que valoran la participación deportiva. Los resultados mostraron que algunas dimensiones de autopercepción estaban asociadas con diferentes frecuencias de participación deportiva mientras que los juicios generales de autovalía no lo estaban. En concreto, en chicos y chicas, los elevados niveles de participación deportiva estuvieron positivamente asociados con Competencia Deportiva, y en chicos estuvieron también asociados con Apariencia Física y Aceptación Social. Se destacan las implicaciones potenciales de los procesos de socialización en determinados ámbitos sobre la configuración de las autopercepciones.

*Palabras clave:* autopercepciones, autovalía, adolescentes, participación deportiva, género.

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Since the seminal work of James (1890), self-esteem has been considered to be an index of well-being or mental health. From the perspective of various disciplines, researchers have been exploring how individuals' evaluations of self-esteem can be maintained or improved. One of the life domains in which levels of self-esteem can be affected is the athletic context (Bowker, Gadbois, & Cornock, 2003; Fox, 2000; Smoll, Smith, & Barnett, 1993).

Sport is an important context for teenagers (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). Involvement in sport activities allows adolescents to interact with others (e.g., peers, coaches), and to develop in several important aspects in their lives, such as, athletic aspects (e.g., learn and develop different physical skills), social aspects (e.g., to make friends), physical aspects (e.g., build body) and health aspects (e.g., physical fitness, obesity). The nature of their sport experience and the consequences of this participation allow them to develop their self-concept, specifically their physical and social self-perceptions.

From a psychosocial perspective, sport participation (e.g., playing organized football, tennis or handball) can hold different implications for boys and girls in our society. Currently, sport is still considered mainly a male domain (Gill, 2004) and as a consequence via socialization processes, parents and other significant adults have higher expectations for boys participating in sport than girls (i.e., Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990; Frederic & Eccles, 2004; Greendorfer, 1993). Via such socialization process, boys and girls learn a constellation of physical and psychological characteristics held to be appropriated to the masculine and feminine gender that is determined by society (Deaux, 1984). In essences teenagers through the process of gender identification learn stereotypes linked to being a boy or girl in their culture through sport engagement. As a result, sport participation can hold different implications in the development of self-perceptions for boys and girls. Based on the postulation of the "looking glass self" what society conceives as valuable is going to affect on the construction of adolescents self-perceptions (Cooley, 1902).

In this paper, we will employ Harter's conceptualisation of self-concept and self-esteem which conceives that "self is both a cognitive and social construction" (Harter, 1999, p. 8). When Harter (1999) defines self-concept, she uses such a term to indicate self-representations, self-perceptions or self-descriptions and views these as "attributes or characteristics of the self that are consciously acknowledged by the individual through language – that is, how one describes oneself" (Harter, 1999, p. 3). Specifically, we utilize the term "self-concept" or "self-perceptions" when we focus on those characteristics that reflect the individual's sense of adequacy in particular domains (e.g., their perceived academic competence or their perceived athletic competence). Global self-evaluation has generally been understood with respect to the concept as self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979), self-worth (Harter, 1982, 1993, 1999) or general self-concept (Marsh,

1986, 1987). In general, these terms refer to the overall evaluation by the individual of his or her value as a person. In the construction of the items assessing self-esteem/self-worth /general self-concept, researchers try to capture how one perceives one's worth as a person; that is, the global sense of oneself and not the sum of the self-evaluations in the different domains targeted in a questionnaire.

The relationship of self-concept and self-esteem to sport participation has been studied for several decades. Although not all investigators have found a positive association between regular engagement in sport and self-concept and self-esteem (see Fox, 2000 for a review), some meta-analyses have revealed a significant effect size indicating that people who participate in sport programs, on a regular basis, have higher self-esteem than sedentary people. This pattern has been obtained for children (Gruber, 1986) and adolescents as well (Calfas & Taylor, 1994). Due to the inconsistency of these findings some researchers decided to study the results of the literature distinguishing between specific self-perceptions and global self-esteem. In this direction, Fox (2000, p. 97) has pointed out that "sport and exercise participation are weakly related with global self-esteem in many studies but this relationship is inconsistent", and that more consistent and stronger results are offered when sport participation is related to aspects of physical self (Fox, 2000). One example of the absence of relationship between physical activity and self-esteem was the longitudinal study conducted by Lintunen and her colleagues with Finnish students of 11 to 15 year old. They found that self-esteem did not differ between three differential activity groups (sedentary, physically active and very active groups) for both boys and girls (Lintunen, Rahkila, & Leskinen, 1995).

Regarding the more robust and consistent link between perceptions of physical self and sport engagement suggested in the literature (Fox, 2000), results from current works are supporting these relationship. Specifically, and concerning the two physical self-dimensions included in Harter's questionnaire (athletic competence and physical appearance) athletic competence has received more attention in the literature.

Several motivational theories (e.g. Harter, 1978) predict positive associations between perceived athletic competence and sport participation. Support for this assumption has been offered in the current literature (e.g., Asci, Kosar, & Isler, 2001; Papaioannou, Bebetos, Theodorakis, Christodoulidis, & Kouli, 2006; Pastor, Balaguer, & García-Merita, 2006). Pastor and her colleagues studied the relationship between athletic competence and sport participations on Spanish adolescents aged between 15 and 18 years old. For both gender groups sport participation was positively related to athletic competence (Pastor et al., 2006). Asci et al. (2001) studied the association between these variables in a sample of Turkish early adolescents and their results also supported that higher levels of physical activity corresponded to higher levels of perceived athletic

competence. Finally, in a longitudinal study, Papaioannou and his colleagues (Papaioannou et al., 2006) explored the relationship between athletic competence and participation in sport and exercise in a sample of Greek students. Their results indicated that perceived athletic competence, both at the beginning and the end of the academic year, predicted sport and exercise participation 7 and 14 months later.

Regarding physical appearance, the other dimension of physical self included in Harter's questionnaire, Harter (1999) has emphasized the importance of this dimension in adolescence and has pointed out that is even more important for girls than for boys. Historically sports have been considered a male domain where male sports figures symbolize powerful role models that male children and adolescents are ready to imitate. Despite the gains that some females have achieved in entering the world of sports, women athletes have not, for the most part, been perceived as role models for those girls and female adolescents in the conventional culture. Clearly, in Spain, the current female role models are glamorous women who are really thin, an image that is not consistent with the muscular, mesomorphic body types of most female athletes (Toro, 1996).

Some studies have explored the links between sport and physical activity and physical self-image (e. g. Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006; Kirkcaldy, Shephard, & Siefen, 2002; Pastor & Balaguer, 1999). A positive association between sport involvement and physical self-image has been found not only in correlational studies, but also in studies using experimental designs (Greenleaf, Boyer, & Petrie 2009). Kirkcaldy et al., 2002, for example, examined associations between the extent of participation in endurance sport, and self-report data on self-image, physical and psychological health and overall lifestyle in a large representative sample of German high-school students. They found that regular practice of endurance exercise was related to a more favorable self-image. Similarly, Pastor and Balaguer (1999) in a study with Spanish adolescents didn't find differences in physical appearance between adolescents with different level of participation (sedentary, low, moderate, and high level). However they found that participating in competitions was a variable that discriminate between higher and lower levels of physical appearance, that is, adolescent that participate in competitions, perceived higher physical appearance than those that don't participate.

Hausenblas and Fallon (2006), in their meta-analysis on exercise and body image, found that experimental research supported the notion that physical activity leads to improved body image.

During adolescence, sport participation also contributes to build social relationship and in consequence to develop adolescents' self-perception regarding to be accepted or rejected by their peers (Jaffe, 1998). Weiss and Duncan (1992) in a sample of American boys and girls (from 8 to 13 years old) found that to be good in sport was related to be accepted socially in both gender groups.

Since does not exist any research in the Spanish adolescence population on the relationships between the dimensions of self-concept and different frequency levels of sport participation, attempt to address this objective is the principal contribution of this work. To carry out it we will use a Spanish version of SPPC (Atienza, Balaguer, & Moreno, 2002) with a large and representative randomized sample of Spanish adolescents.

The objective of the present study was to examine the associations between specific self-perceptions and global self-worth in accordance with different frequency levels of sport participation in a sample of Spanish adolescents, in both gender groups.

As self-esteem is a more complex and overall appraisal of ones worth, we expected self-esteem not to be associated to sport participation. However we do hypothesized that different frequency levels of sport participations will be associated to some specific self-perception dimensions, some of them concerning to facets of physical self and other pertaining to social self (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976)

Regarding specific physical self-perceptions, we expected that boys and girls with higher levels of sport participation will perceive themselves to be higher in athletic competence, than the ones with lower levels of participation.

Moreover, as sports are still generally considered to be a masculine domain (e. g., Kirchengast & Marosi, 2008), and that in general sport participation shapes bodies in the masculine body stereotype, we hypothesized that sport participation will correspond to greater perceived physical appearance, the other studied dimension of physical self, only in boys. Specifically, it was expected that boys would view their bodies as more attractive when they participate in sport.

Finally, and also emphasizing the meaning of sport as a masculine domain, and taking into consideration that sport participation is typically more valued and expected for boys than for girls in Spanish society (e. g., Vazquez, 1993), and also that adolescents sport participation could be associated with the perception of being accepted or rejected by peers (p. e., Weiss & Duncan, 1992), we hypothesized that sport participation will correspond to greater perceived social acceptance (other self-perception in Harter's questionnaire) only in boys.

## Method

### *Sample*

A representative sample of 917 Spanish students, 457 Boys ( $M$  age = 14.52,  $SD$  = 1.80) and 460 Girls ( $M$  age = 14.40,  $SD$  = 1.77) from the Comunidad Valenciana participate in this study. The students were between 11 and 16 years of age ( $M$  age = 14.46.,  $SD$  = 1.79).

### Procedure and Instrumentation

Permission was granted to carry out the current research by the directors of the 130 schools selected for this study (44 from Alicante, 25 from Castellón, and 61 from Valencia). All the schools contacted accepted to participate in the study. In each school centre, students were randomly selected and completed the questionnaire anonymously. After providing their consent, in small groups, the questionnaires were administered by the second author and other trained research assistants a multi-section inventory containing measures of self-perceptions, sport participation as well as other variables which are not addressed in this study. The groups were never larger than 5 participants. On average, the students took one hour to complete the multi-section instrument. All responses were anonymous and the children were assured of confidentiality.

*Self-Perception Profile for Children.* A Spanish version of the SPPC (Self-Perception Profile for Children, Harter, 1985; Atienza et al., 2002), which has demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties, was administered. This instrument consists of 36 items assessing six self-perceptions in six areas. Five of the subscales provide separate measures of children's perceptions of themselves in different domains of their lives (i.e., scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioural conduct). One of the six subscales is an independent assessment of one's global self-worth. The items are responded to on a 4-point scale in forced-choice format in which respondents first decide which kind of person they most resemble and then whether that description "is sort of true" or "really true" for them. For example, in terms of the assessment of scholastic competence, an exemplary item would be, "Some kids often forget what they learn", but "Other kids can remember things easily".

*Health Behavior of School Children.* An adaptation of items contained in The Health Behavior of School Children

(Wold, 1995; Balaguer, 1999, 2002) was used for assessing sport participation. Participants responded to the following items: "Outside of school do you participate in sports such as soccer, basketball, volleyball, tennis, handball, athletics, martial arts, aerobics, swimming, ballet, etc.?" The frequency scale included 6 response alternatives from *never* to *6-7 times a week* (that is, never practice sport, practice less than once a week, practice once a week, practice between 2-3 times a week, practice between 4-5 times a week, and practice between 6-7 times a week). The duration scale included 6 response alternatives ranging from 5 minutes of practice to 45 minutes (that is, less than 5 minutes, between 5-10 minutes, between 15-20 minutes, between 25-30 minutes, between 35 and 45 minutes and more than 45 minutes).

Based on the participants' responses to these items, and following the general guides regarding frequency and session length to improve or maintain psychological well-being (e.g., Sallis & Patric, 1994) we distinguished between four different levels of participation: sedentary (never practice sport), low (practice less than once a week or once a week), moderate (practice between 2-3 times a week) and high (practice between 4-5 times or 6-7 times a week). For this investigation, only the cases in which the incidence of sport practice lasted 25-30 minutes or more were considered (Sallis & Patric, 1994).

### Results

#### *Descriptive analysis of self-perceptions, self-worth and sport participation by gender*

The means and standard deviations in self-perceptions by gender are presented in Table 1. For both genders, the observed social acceptance, behavioural conduct and self-worth scores were quite positive (approximately 3 on the 4-point scale). The lower mean values for boys corresponded to scholastic competence and for girls to physical appearance.

Table 1

*Mean Subscale Scores and Standard Deviations of Self-perceptions and Self-worth by Level of Sport Participation and Gender*

	Scholastic competence		Social acceptance		Athletic competence		Physical appearance		Behavioral conduct		Self-worth	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Boys	2.64	0.58	3.00	0.55	2.82	0.58	2.74	0.69	2.85	0.56	3.05	0.59
1	2.63	0.56	2.85	0.68	2.50	0.54	2.56	0.70	2.89	0.58	3.03	0.67
2	2.58	0.50	2.79	0.50	2.49	0.55	2.56	0.66	2.79	0.51	2.95	0.55
3	2.65	0.63	3.07	0.53	2.91	0.54	2.80	0.68	2.83	0.58	3.07	0.57
4	2.67	0.56	3.07	0.49	3.04	0.53	2.86	0.67	2.88	0.54	3.09	0.60
Girls	2.53	0.63	2.94	0.59	2.43	0.62	2.37	0.82	2.92	0.54	2.93	0.66
1	2.44	0.62	2.91	0.60	2.20	0.54	2.33	0.83	2.88	0.56	2.90	0.69
2	2.57	0.67	2.89	0.61	2.40	0.61	2.33	0.86	2.94	0.50	2.91	0.66
3	2.57	0.61	2.98	0.55	2.66	0.59	2.43	0.77	3.00	0.52	2.99	0.63
4	2.67	0.70	3.04	0.59	2.74	0.65	2.40	0.87	2.81	0.57	2.92	0.65

Note. 1 = Sedentary; 2 = Low; 3 = Moderate; 4 = High.

Cross-tabulation analyses were done in order to study the descriptive relationship between sport participation and gender. For boys, a greater percentage practiced at a moderate level and high level. The percentage of boys who participated in sport between 2-3 times a week was about 45% and those who practiced between 4-7 times a week was approximately 26%. On the other hand, 14.9% of boys never practiced sport and about 14% practiced very little. Therefore, almost three quarters of the boys (71.1%) engaged in sport (high and moderate practice groups), and a little more than a fourth (28.9%) could be considered sedentary (never and low practice groups). Among the girls, the situation was quite different. The two categories which predominated were sedentary group [that is, those that never practiced (42.4%)] and moderately active group (32.8%). The percentage of girls who practiced very little (low practice) is 15.4% and the percentage of girls who practiced a lot (high practice group) was 9.3%. These 57.8% girls could be considered relatively inactive if we collapse the sedentary and low active groups.

*Analysis of self-perceptions and self-worth in accordance with frequency of sport participation: Differences by gender*

A 4 (activity groups) MANOVA was performed with the self-perceptions dimensions and global self-worth as the dependent variables for both boys and girls. For the boys, the results showed a multivariate effect for activity groups: Wilk's Lambda = .83,  $F(18, 1140.34) = 4.16, p < .001$ . The univariate analyses indicated that the activity group effect was significant for athletic competence,  $F(3,408) = 22.88, p < .001$ , physical appearance,  $F(3,408) = 4.59, p < .05$ , and social acceptance,  $F(3,408) = 6.69, p < .001$ , but not for scholastic competence,  $F(3,408) = .38, p > .05$ , behavioural conduct,  $F(3,408) = .63, p > .05$  and self-worth,  $F(3,408) = .76, p > .05$ . The Student Newman Keuls post-hoc contrast indicated that the moderate-practice and high-practice groups of boys exhibited higher athletic competence; higher physical appearance and higher social acceptance than the sedentary and low-practice groups (Table 1).

For girls, a multivariate effect for activity groups also emerged: Wilk's Lambda = .86,  $F(18, 1194.08) = 4.21, p < .001$ . The univariate test indicated that the activity group effect was only significant for athletic competence,  $F(3, 427) = 22.55, p < .001$ , but not for the other self-perceptions [i.e., - scholastic competence,  $F(3, 427) = 1.58, p > .05$ , social competence,  $F(3, 427) = 1.07, p > .05$ , physical appearance,  $F(3, 427) = .44, p > .05$ , behavioural conduct,  $F(3, 427) = 1.63, p > .05$ , and self-worth,  $F(3, 427) = .60, p > .05$ ]. The Student Newman Keuls post-hoc tests revealed that high and moderate- practice groups of girls held more positive perceptions of athletic competence than both groups of sedentary girls (sedentary and low), and that low practice group of girls held more positive perceptions of athletic competence than the sedentary group (Table 1).

## Discussion

In order to study the association between specific self-perceptions and global self-worth with different frequency levels of sport participation among boys and girls Spanish adolescents we used Harter's Self Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985).

In accordance with previous studies (e.g., Litunen et al., 1995; Fox, 2000) the results of this work showed that specific self-perceptions rather than global self-esteem were positively associated to frequency levels of sport participation in both gender groups.

Athletic competence is the unique dimension of physical self that is associated with different levels of sport participation in both gender groups. The results indicated that when boys and girls are actively engaged in sport (i.e., are members of the moderate-practice and high-practice groups), they perceive themselves to be higher in athletic competence than sedentary teenagers (i.e., those in the never and low-practice groups). And also, in the group of girls, the ones that participated once at week or less than once at week (group 2) perceived themselves as possessing higher athletic competence than the ones that never participate in sport. These findings are in accordance with transversal studies (Asci et al., 2001; Jackson & Marsh, 1986; Pastor et al, 2006) and longitudinal researches (Litunen et al., 1995; Papaioannou et al., 2006) that reported a link between athletic competence and sport participation. In sum, and in line with motivational theories (e. g. Harter, 1978) feeling competent in sport is positively linked to participation in this domain in both gender groups.

In accordance to our prediction, physical appearance, the other dimension of physical self, was associated to sport participation only in the boys group. Boys that practice sport with regularity (moderate and high participation) have higher perceptions of their physical appearance than the sedentary or low-practice groups. As sport is considered a male domain (Bowker, Gadbois, & Cornock, 2003; Gill, 2004) and the image of the bodies of the active boys reflect a muscular, mesomorphic body type, those boys that are active with regularity perceive their bodies as more attractive than the other ones that are sedentary or are active in few occasions.

Finally, as we suggested, our results informed that social acceptance appears as another specific self-perception that is associated to sport participation, only in the boys group. The association between sport participation and social acceptance is consistent with the presumed underlying importance of sport in the world of boys' adolescents in Spanish culture and in general (Harter, 1999). In the present study boys that engage in sport, perceived themselves as more accepted by their peers than sedentary boys.

These results regarding the link between athletic competence and peer acceptance for boys are in line with the findings of Weiss and Duncan (1992), although the U.S. children in that study were a little younger (from 8 to 13

years old) than the youngsters in our sample. Moreover, Weiss and Duncan observed this positive relationship between perceiving one self to be good in sport and being successful in peer relations among the girls as well. Differences in the bases of social status hierarchies among adolescents in both countries may be the reason for these discrepancies. Although sport competence is more valued for boys than for girls in both countries, it seems that in Spain being good in sport is not as salient for girls as appears to be the case for American girls. Further cross-cultural research would be necessary to clarify which facets of sport participation (type of sport, level of sport involvement, etc.) are emphasized for girls and for boys by significant others, especially with respect to peers as they have been found to be particularly influential during this developmental period (Jaffe, 1998).

Although our study doesn't allow us to address hypotheses regarding cause-effect relationships, the present results suggest some considerations that should be tested in future research: that is, whether perceptions of physical capability may be enhanced through sport engagement for Spanish adolescents in general and a sense of physical attractiveness and social acceptance may be fostered in Spanish boys' adolescents.

In the same direction that previous research (see Fox, 2000) our results also imply that sport participation is perhaps not the best way to directly enhance self-worth in teenagers. It was the more domain-specific self-perceptions rather than the omnibus across-domain evaluation or self-worth that was linked to sport participation.

Finally, the results of the current study suggest potential implications of socialization processes in terms of the relationship between sport participation and self-perceptions. The findings make us think that one of the reasons why boys participate in sport, at the ages studied, is because they are receiving the positive reinforcement of their peers and other important groups of significant others, regarding different aspects of the self (e.g., how they should and do look). However, for girls, the situation appears to not be the same. When Spanish girls participate in sport, they do not seem to be receiving the same messages (from significant others/society). Society expects girls to have thin, feminine bodies rather than the athletic muscular bodies that can be the result from participation in some sports (Toro, 1996). This can be one of the reasons that limit the girls' desire to continue practicing sports, as they grow older. Also, in Spanish adolescents' boys, sport involvement appears to be coupled with greater popularity and integration with one's peers. However such potential social benefits do not seem to be operating for Spanish adolescent's girls.

Finally, it should be noted that although one of the study strengths is the large and representative randomized sample of Spanish adolescents, one of the limitations is that it is cross-sectional in design. In future research, longitudinal, experimental and qualitative work is needed to clarify such relationships between genders, the self, and sport engagement.

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