



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research in Developmental Disabilities

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/redevdis

Physical self-concept and body dissatisfaction among Special Olympics athletes: A comparison between sex, weight status, and culture

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ARTICLE INFO

Number of reviews: 2

Keywords:

Physical self-concept
 Body dissatisfaction
 Special Olympics
 Intellectual disabilities

ABSTRACT

Background: Little research has looked at the associations between sex, weight status and culture, and the physical self-perceptions and body dissatisfaction of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) involved in Special Olympics (SO) sports.

Aims: To examine sex- (male vs female), weight status- (non-overweight/obese vs. overweight/obese), and culture-based (North American vs. Asian) differences in physical self-concept and body dissatisfaction among SO athletes.

Methods and procedures.: A total of 139 SO athletes (aged 12–30 years) with ID participated in this study and completed measures of physical self-perceptions and body dissatisfaction. Differences according to sex, weight status, culture, and their interactions were examined.

Outcomes and results: Males SO athletes presented higher levels of self-perceived physical strength and ideal body shape than females. Additionally, non-overweight/obese SO athletes presented higher levels of self-perceived physical appearance and physical condition than their overweight/obese counterparts, as well as lower actual body shape perceptions and body dissatisfaction. Moreover, North-American SO athletes presented higher levels of self-perceived physical appearance and sport competence than their Asians counterparts, as well as lower actual body shapes perceptions and body dissatisfaction.

Conclusion and implications: This study reveals substantial sex-, weight status-, and culture-based differences in the physical self-concept and body dissatisfaction of SO athletes.

What this paper adds?

The findings from this study have generated new insights about the sex-, weight status-, and culture-based differences in the physical self-concept and body dissatisfaction of Special Olympics (SO) athletes with intellectual disabilities (ID), an area of research that has generally been neglected thus far. First, our results showed that each of these factors was independently and additively related to some facets of the physical self-concept and body dissatisfaction. Second, in comparison with the results from other studies relying on populations with ID, this study reinforces the idea that male SO athletes may prefer larger physiques than females. In contrast, body dissatisfaction levels significantly differed between adolescent males and females. Third, overweight/obese SO athletes

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Received 16 May 2017; Received in revised form 14 December 2017; Accepted 13 February 2018

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with ID tended to present lower levels of perceived physical appearance, physical condition, and actual body shape, as well as higher levels of body dissatisfaction than their non-overweight/obese SO counterparts. Fourth, the present study reveals cross-cultural differences in SO athlete physical self-perceptions and body image, showing that North American SO athletes with ID tended to present higher levels of perceived physical appearance and sport competence, as well lower actual body shape self-ratings and lower levels of body dissatisfaction than their Asian counterparts. Importantly, these differences could be identified despite our reliance on a relatively small sample size, attesting to their practical significance.

1. Introduction

Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976) defined self-concept as a multidimensional and hierarchical construct encompassing many characteristics, competencies and roles possessed or played by individuals and referring to the perception, evaluation, beliefs and feelings that a person holds about himself or herself across a variety of domains (also see Fox, 2000; Harter, 2012). In this conception, global self-esteem occupies the top of the self-concept hierarchy, and followed by individual domain-specific self-conceptions related to the physical, social, academic, emotional, and professional areas. Among these various self-domains, the physical self-concept refers to a composite of individual self-perceptions related to physical appearance, athletic abilities, and physical capacities (Fox & Corbin, 1989; Marsh, 1996). Following Shavelson et al. (1976), Fox and Corbin (1989) proposed a multidimensional representation of the physical self-concept in which global self-esteem occupies the top of the hierarchy, global physical self-worth occupies the middle level of this hierarchy, and the lowest level is occupied by four physical subdomains related to physical appearance (i.e., self-perceptions regarding one's physical attractiveness), physical condition (i.e., self-perceptions regarding one's stamina and fitness level), physical strength (i.e., self-perceptions regarding one's physical strength, muscularity, and ability to lift heavy objects), and sport competence (i.e., self-perceptions regarding one's athletic abilities and capacity to improve these abilities).

In addition to the self-concept tradition, another frequent approach to the study of physical self-perceptions relates to individuals' self-assessment of their own physical shape and body characteristics (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002), often in relation to perceived culturally-influenced standard defining what a normative body "ideal" should look like (Esnaola, Rodríguez, & Goñi, 2010). Hereafter, we refer to this process of self-evaluation of one's body characteristics in relation to perceived standards as body dissatisfaction, a distinct construct with well-established relations with multidimensional physical self-conceptions (Fanchang et al., 2013; Grogan, 2010; Reel, Bucciare, & SooHoo, 2013).

1.1. Physical self-perceptions and body dissatisfaction among typically-developing individuals

The study of the physical self-concept and body image among typically-developing (TD) individuals forms a well-established field of research. In particular, this area of research has led to the identification of sex, weight status, and culture as key personal characteristics that tend to be associated with marked differences in individuals' physical self-perceptions and body dissatisfaction.

1.1.1. Sex

The presence of marked sex-related differences is well-documented among TD individuals, which have generally shown lower levels in physical self-conceptions and higher levels of body dissatisfaction among females, relative to males (Babic et al., 2014; Beasley & Garn, 2013; Çağlar, 2009; Marsh, 2002). Furthermore, females' levels of physical self-perceptions appear to be more sensitive to the effects of social pressures (Smolak, 2006), leading women to express higher levels of concerns related to their physical appearance when compared to men (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002).

1.1.2. Weight status

The influence of weight status on the physical self-concept (e.g., Fairclough, Boddy, Ridgers, & Stratton, 2012; Marsh, Hau, Sung, & Yu, 2007; Morano, Colella, Robazza, Bortoli, & Capranica, 2011) and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Banitt et al., 2008; Morano et al., 2011; Shriver et al., 2013) of TD individual has also been extensively documented in previous research. Generally, these results tend to show that normal weight individuals tend to present more positive physical self-perceptions relative to their underweight, overweight, or obese peers (e.g., Fairclough et al., 2012; Marsh et al., 2007), a difference that may be even more pronounced among females (e.g., Marsh et al., 2007; Morano et al., 2011).

1.1.3. Culture

Research suggests that physical standards may differ as a function of sociocultural norms about desirable physical attributes (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Smith, Noll, & Bryant, 1999), exposure to gender stereotypes through media and social sources of influences (Klomsten, Shaalvik, & Espnes, 2004), and degree of skin exposure (Maiano et al., 2006). These factors purportedly influence how youth from diverse cultures and countries perceive themselves in the physical area and the importance that they attribute to a variety of physical self-domains (Scalas, Morin, Marsh, & Nagengast, 2014; Smith et al., 1999).

However, despite these observations, there is so far only very limited research regarding expected cross-cultural differences on physical self-perception and body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, this limited evidence remains limited by a simplistic focus on the comparison of cultural groups on a basis of a single dimension: individualism (including North American samples) and collectivism (including Asian samples) (Aşçı, Alfermann, Çağlar, & Stiller, 2008; Hagger, Aşçı, & Lindwall, 2004; Hagger, Biddle, Chow, Stambulova, & Kavussanu, 2003; Lindwall, Aşçı, Palmeira, Fox, & Hagger (2011); Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Oyserman & Lee, 2008; Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Tomás, Marsh, González-Romá, Valls, & Nagengast, 2014). Interestingly, with few exceptions

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