

Method Effects and Gender Invariance of the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale: A Study on Adolescents

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Abstract

Rosenberg's self-esteem scale has been extensively used in all areas of psychology to assess global self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965, 1979). Its construct validity, and specifically its factor structure, has almost from the beginning been under debate. More than four decades after its creation the cumulated evidence points that the scale measures a single trait (self-esteem) but confounded by a method factor associated to negatively worded items. The aim of the study is to examine the measurement invariance of the RSES by gender and test potential gender differences at the latent (trait and method) variable level, while controlling for method effects, in a sample of Spanish students. A series of completely *a priori* structural models were specified, with a standard invariance routine implemented for male and female samples. The results lead to several conclusions. Conclusions: a) the scale seem gender invariant for both trait and method factors; b) there were small but significant differences between males and females in self-esteem, differences that favored male respondents; and c) there were statistically non-significant differences between men and women in the method factor's latent means.

Keywords: Measurement Invariance, Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, Gender Differences

Efectos de Método y Estabilidad entre Sexos de la Escala de Autoestima de Rosenberg: Un Estudio en Adolescentes

Resumen

La Escala de Autoestima de Rosenberg (EAR) ha sido utilizada extensamente en todas las áreas de la Psicología para evaluar la autoestima (Rosenberg, 1965, 1979). Su validez de constructo, y particularmente su estructura factorial, ha estado en debate casi desde que fue construida. Más de cuatro décadas después de su creación, la evidencia acumulada señala que la escala evalúa un solo rasgo (autoestima), aunque se confunde con un método factorial asociado de manera negativa con reactivos verbales. El objetivo de este estudio fue evaluar la estabilidad de la medición de la EAR entre sexos y poner a prueba potenciales diferencias entre los mismos en un nivel latente de la variable (rasgo y estado), controlando efectos de método, en una muestra de estudiantes españoles. Se especificaron una serie de modelos estructurales *a priori*, con rutinas implementadas de invarianza estándar para muestras de hombres y mujeres. Los resultados llevan a diferentes conclusiones: a) La escala parece ser invariable ante el sexo tanto para factores de rasgo como de estado; b) existieron diferencias pequeñas, pero significativas, entre hombres y mujeres en autoestima, favoreciendo ligeramente a los hombres; y, c) no existieron diferencias estadísticamente significativas entre hombres y mujeres en las medias de la variable latente del factor.

Palabras Clave: Invarianza de Medición, Escala de Autoestima de Rosenberg, Diferencias por Sexo

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The different studies conducted on self-esteem during last years have highlighted the presence of gender differences, both in global and domain-specific instruments (e. g., Gentile, *et al.*, 2009; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999), even though these differences had not been pointed out in major previous reviews (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Wylie, 1979). From the evidence accumulated through studies, the strongest one is the meta-analytical evidence. In a recent meta-analysis dealing with gender differences in domain specific self-esteem, which included 428 effect sizes from 115 scientific papers, men rated significantly higher than women in physical appearance self-esteem ($d = 0.35$), athletic self-esteem ($d = 0.41$), personal self-esteem ($d = 0.28$) and self-satisfaction self-esteem ($d = 0.33$), whereas women rated higher than men in behavior self-esteem ($d = -0.17$) and moral-ethical self-esteem ($d = -0.38$), and no statistically significant gender differences were found for academic, social, familiar, and affective self-esteems (Gentile *et al.*, 2009).

As regards gender differences in global self-esteem instruments, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) is the most widely used scale in this topic (e. g., Kling *et al.*, 1999; Owens & Kling, 2001). In a meta-analysis developed by Kling *et al.* (1999) about gender differences on global self-esteem measurement, 62% of the effect sizes examined (135 of 218) were based on the RSES. This study showed a small but statistically significant difference between men and women in self-esteem, favoring men ($d = 0.22$). Nevertheless, the accuracy of the gender differences found in self-esteem, as recently noted by DiStefano and Motl (2009a), heavily rely on the assumption of gender invariance of the measurement instruments, or in this particular case, on the psychometric invariance of the RSES.

Several studies have analyzed the RSES factorial structure, and also its gender invariance (Byrne & Shavelson, 1987; Hoelter, 1983). These authors have assessed to which extent the scale measures the same construct for both sexes, finding the same factorial structure and the same factor loadings in both cases. However, the study of the gender factorial invariance has not considered the method effects associated to negatively worded items, which had systematically been found in the RSES latent structure (e. g., Carmines & Zeller, 1979; Corwyn, 2000; DiStefano & Motl, 2006, 2009a; Horan, DiStefano, & Motl, 2003; Marsh, 1996; Marsh, Scalas, & Nagesgast, 2010; Motl & DiStefano, 2002; Quilty, Oakman, & Risko, 2006; Supple, Su, Plunkett, Peterson & Bush, 2013; Tomás & Oliver, 1999; Wang, Siegal, Falck, & Carlson, 2001).

As affirmed by DiStefano and Motl (2009b), the consistent existence of these method effects associated to negatively worded items may have important implications in the study and of factorial invariance of the RSES. For example, a recent study by Supple, Su, Plunkett, Peterson & Bush (2013) evaluated factor structure and method effects associated to negatively worded items of the RSES with samples of European American, Latino, Armenian, and Iranian adolescents. Their findings suggested that method effects in the RSES were more pronounced among ethnic minority adolescents, and they pointed out that accounting for method effects is necessary to avoid biased conclusions regarding cultural differences in self-esteem. In particular, with respect to gender invariance, the

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