

EVALUATIVE ASPECTS INVOLVED IN SELF-CONCEPT, BODY IMAGE AND GENDER IN AN ADOLESCENT SAMPLE

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Abstract

The perception and evaluation of one's own body image has turned out to be one of the main aspects concerning self-concept. It is also related to the different dimensions involved in global self-esteem. This suggests that the way a person perceives his or her own physical appearance may result from certain internal self-evaluations. Thus, higher self-esteem seems to correspond with a more positive body image. At the same time, there appears to be differences in the feelings associated to body parts depending on gender.

The relationship between body image and self-esteem is examined in this research. We take, as a starting point, the hypothesis that the individual's gender construct significantly influences the different aspects involved in self-concept (competence, self-control, moral self-approval, physical appearance, interpersonal recognition).

Included in a wider research *, multivariate analysis were carried out in a sample of 306 male and female teenagers from six different schools.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the human body has been represented in many different ways, each of them symbolically conveying those values, beliefs and aesthetic canons that a given culture ascribes to males and females. Thus, the body provides the individual with a historical point of reference, and this is why body image refers not only to a private experience, but also to the public sphere of cultural signification. These, in turn, normatively correlate with values of goodness, beauty and health, regulating as well interpersonal relationships.

Sex differences in body self-esteem usually mirror those values. In case of females, appearance and physical beauty is stressed. In contrast, males are more likely to focus attention on the instrumental functioning of their bodies (Cash and Brown, 1989; Franzoi, 1995).

The perception and evaluation of body image is part of the "self", is one of the main aspects concerning self-concept, and exerts a crucial influence on the psychological construction. Therefore, a global perspective must be adopted for its study, one that takes into account physical, symbolical, as well as social factors.

A basic cultural component of body image within its gender dimension is stressed by the social perspective. According to Bourdieu (1977), "Body awareness is essentially a sociocultural product, and the relationship we establish with our own body would not directly

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correspond with the image we get of it from others, but to certain legitimate body models that rule the evaluation of that image depending on the subject's position within the social structure".

As the **general hypothesis of our research**, we claim that having a body image which does not correspond with the prevailing social values and ideals may seriously damage self-esteem; and vice versa, when self-esteem is higher, the evaluation of one's own image is usually more positive. This shows that the way an individual perceives his or her own physical appearance may be the result of his or her internal self-evaluations.

- **Specifically**, we have examined our initial hypothesis that there exists a relationship between the evaluations subjects make of their different body parts and certain aspects pertaining to self-esteem.

In addition to this, we believe that the influence of gender models on the subjectivity construction affects self-concept components in clearly differentiated ways.

- Therefore, the relationship between those aspects involved in the evaluation of body image and self-concept may show significant differences between males and females.
- Moreover, we also examine the relevance of gender roles following the specific hypothesis that masculinity and androgyny, in males as well as in females, are related to a more positive body-image and self-view.

METHOD

The sample of three hundred and six students (153 females and 153 males) ranging in age from 13 to 15 years, resided in different (rural, semi-rural and urban) areas.

Measures:

- **Body Esteem Scale (BES)** (Franzoi & Shields, 1984):

Multidimensional measure of body esteem, with differentiated scales for each sex, factorially derived from the Body Cathexis Scale (Secord and Jourard, 1953).

Females: 1. Sexual Attractiveness; 2. Weight Concern; 3. Physical Condition.

Males: 1. Physical Attractiveness; 2. Upper Body Strength; 3. Physical Condition

- **Multidimensional Self-Esteem Inventory (MSEI)** (O'Brian & Epstein, 1983): It is a self-report measure concerning different aspects of personal and interpersonal factors.

Subscales: I. Body Appearance; II. Body Functioning; III. Personal Power. IV. Moral Self-Approval; V. Identity Integration; VI. Competence; VII. Defensive Self-Enhancement; VIII. Global Self-Esteem; IX. Self-Control; X. Lovability; XI. Likability.

It has to be taken into account that those factors that, according to O'Brian and Epstein, show less factorial confirmation (V, VIII and XI) are not included in this research.

- **Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)** (Bem, 1974): Masculinity and femininity are measured as two dimensions independent of gender roles, and from which four different categories may result: masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated. Subjects are assigned to one of these four gender role groups depending on their self-endorsement of the traits each of them imply.

Statistical Analyses:

- Correlations between MSEI and BES factors, separately for males and females.

- Analysis of the variance between the four BSRI levels, in each of the MSEI scales and in BES as a dependent variable. Post hoc analyses (Tukey) for specific group comparisons were made.

All analyses have been carried out by using the statistical pack SPSS 6.1.

RESULTS

MSEI x BES SIGNIFICATIVE CORRELATIONS

MALE

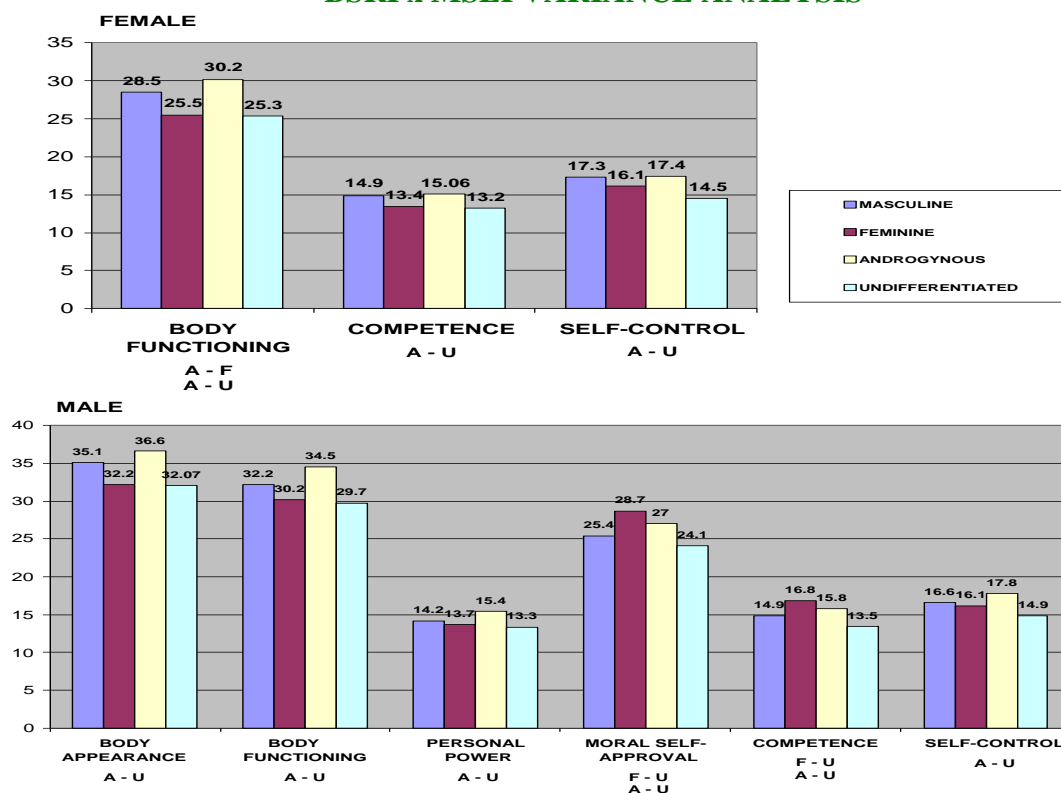
	BES1	BES2	BES3
MSEI1	0,35 ***	0,49 ***	0,38 ***
MSEI2	0,26 **	0,47 ***	0,59 ***
MSEI3			
MSEI4		0,17 *	
MSEI6	0,28 ***	0,35 ***	0,27 **
MSEI7			
MSEI9		0,19 *	
MSEI10		0,22 **	0,18 *

FEMALE

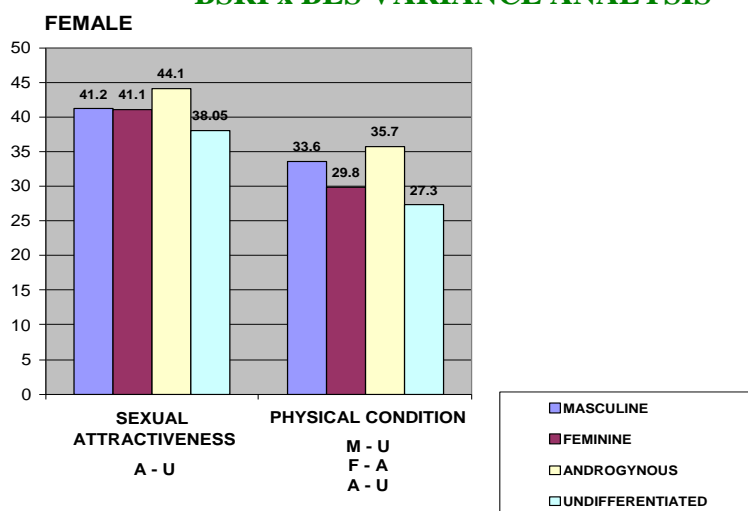
	BES1	BES2	BES3
MSEI1	0,40 ***	0,63 ***	0,43 ***
MSEI2	0,29 ***	0,54 ***	0,64 ***
MSEI3			0,22 **
MSEI4	0,22 **	0,29 ***	0,29 ***
MSEI6	0,31 ***	0,26 **	0,22 **
MSEI7			
MSEI9	0,30 ***	0,23 **	0,40 ***
MSEI10	0,24 **	0,26 **	0,20 *

- Results confirm a positive, though moderate, relationship between different aspects in body esteem and self-esteem ($r = 0.17$ to 0.64).
- The MSEI factors more strongly related to body esteem, due to both degree of importance and number of aspects involved, are body appearance, body functioning and competence.
- Comparison between sexes show differences in the moral self-approval and self-control factors. In case of females, they appear more strongly and variedly related to body esteem than in males. In contrast, males tend to exclusively associate the above mentioned factors with upper body strength.
- The personal power factor is related to physical condition only in case of females, whereas the lovability factor is not related to physical attractiveness only in case of males.

BSRI x MSEI VARIANCE ANALYSIS



BSRI x BES VARIANCE ANALYSIS



DISCUSSION

Results concerning the correlations between MSEI and BES variables suggest that, as it was hypothesized, the feelings associated to different body parts are influenced by the subject's degree of self-esteem. These results are consistent with those obtained by means of the Body Cathexis Scale, the unidimensional precedent of the Body Esteem Scale. Specifically, due to its degree of importance as much as to the number of aspects involved, body esteem turns out to be, regardless of gender, more related to body appearance aspects, body functioning and competence. Moreover, all these are the three aspects involved in the evaluation of self-concept that, in a previous study, showed significant gender differences, favouring males.

On the other hand, the empirical data show more differences in these three dimensions with regard to gender role categories. This is so for the whole sample of subjects, so much at the significance levels as with the number of post hoc significant comparisons. We may interpret this fact as an indicator of the pressure gender models exert on the subjectivity construction, particularly in what concerns body aspects, self-esteem and awareness of one's own competence. The inter-correlations matrix shows a closer association between self-esteem and body esteem dimensions in case of females (which is closely related to self-acceptance, influence, and interpersonal recognition). Nevertheless, the male sample shows significant differences between gender role categories in a higher number of factors. This happens in the BES as well as in the MSEI.

The results from the ANOVAs generally show a better development of self-esteem and a more positive evaluation of body image in the masculine and androgynous groups, in contrast with the feminine and undifferentiated categories. These results are consistent with the Gender Schema Theory which predicts a different degree of endorsement of cultural models depending on gender role. Possibly, it may be that the masculinity traits underlying androgyny favour a more positive self-evaluation, particularly in an instrumental culture like ours is (Jackson, et al., 1988). In contrast, femininity seems to favour a stronger emphasis on appearance and attractiveness in interpersonal relationships, as well as a more negative perception of physical appearance (Snyder and Hansbrouck, 1996). For males, in the MSEI competence and moral self-approval factors, the female gender role shows higher levels of self-esteem, whereas in BES, this gender category favours a positive evaluation of physical attractiveness.

Taken as a whole, the findings of the present research confirm the influence of gender models on psychological development. The relevance of body image in this process, as well as the influence of body awareness and cultural ideals in causing eating disorders, particularly among women, prove the necessity of further exploring this line of research. Future investigations should concentrate, among other things, in finding out the differential effects gender role seems to have on the construction of image evaluation referents and of self-concept in males and females.

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