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## ORIGINAL

### SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND SELF-IMAGE IN TEENAGERS FROM THE MURCIA REGION (SPAIN)

### VIOLENCIA ESCOLAR Y AUTOIMAGEN EN ADOLESCENTES EN LA REGIÓN DE MURCIA (ESPAÑA)

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#### ABSTRACT

This investigation aims to study perceived violence and suffered violence levels in school settings, to analyze satisfaction with body self-image and to explore the relationship among these variables. It is a descriptive study whose sample is made up of 284 secondary students from the Region of Murcia aged 12 to 17. BODY SHAPE self-perceived questionnaire by Stunkard, Sorensen and Schulsinger (1983) and CUVECO questionnaire by Fernández-Baenal et al. (2011) were administered to analyze body self-image and school violence respectively. With regard to their body image the results show that there is a high percentage of students who are dissatisfied, especially girls. Regarding school violence levels, students' perceived violence is stable while suffered

violence decreases progressively. Finally, if students are dissatisfied there is a higher chance of belonging to groups who suffered more violence.

**KEY WORDS:** School violence; bullying; self-image; physical appearance

## RESUMEN

Esta investigación pretende estudiar los niveles de violencia percibida y sufrida en centros escolares, analizar la satisfacción con la autoimagen corporal y la relación entre estas variables. Es un estudio descriptivo cuya muestra está compuesta por 284 escolares de la Región de Murcia con edades comprendidas entre los 12 y 17 años. Se han administrado los cuestionarios BODY SHAPE self-perceived de Stunkard, Sorensen y Schulsinger (1983) para el análisis de la autoimagen corporal y el CUVECO de Fernández-Baenal et al. (2011) para la violencia escolar. Los resultados muestran, sobre la imagen corporal, que existe un elevado porcentaje de adolescentes que están insatisfechos, especialmente las chicas, mientras que sobre la violencia escolar se observa una estabilidad en la evolución de violencia percibida mientras que se produce una disminución de la violencia sufrida. Por último, se ha registrado el mayor riesgo de formar parte de los grupos que más violencia sufren entre quienes mayor descontento muestran con su autoimagen.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Violencia escolar; acoso escolar; autoimagen; apariencia física

## INTRODUCTION

The analysis of the influence of body self-image on the development of subjective well-being is an area of knowledge of growing interest for numerous researchers, as we can see from the scientific research on the subject that's been carried out during the last few years (Steel, Schmitz & Shultz, 2008; Vacek, Coyle & Vera, 2010).

Therefore, it is important to establish the definition of the concept of body image, that is, "the image that our mind forms of our own body" (Schilder, 2000). This self-evaluation of one's own body dimensions may be based in qualitative judgements that may lead to the creation of an image the dimensions of which do not correspond with the real ones (Sepúlveda, Gandarilla & Carrobes, 2004); these are subjects who suffer distortions in the perception of their body image (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005). This way, although it is a perception that has its origin in the individual himself, Rodríguez-Fernández, González-Fernández and Goñi-Grandmontagne (2013) claim that it is conditioned by the cultural pressure of each society, distinguishing three factors as components in that pressure: media influence, family context, and the individual's circle of acquaintances (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2004).

The media tend to communicate a model of physical appearance that's associated to an athletic body or slenderness (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008), that on occasion may even be thought of as unhealthy (Montero, Morales & Carbajal, 2004). In any case, these are campaigns that may cause frustration with one's weight, body dissatisfaction, or fear of not belonging to the social standard (Vaquero-Cristóbal, Alacid, Muyor & López-Miñarro, 2013), when comparing one's own figure with the aforesaid models to whom happiness, success, attractiveness and popularity are attributed (Botta, 2003). For their part, the family, consciously or unconsciously, usually carries on to its younger members a concern with their image that the rest of society creates, stressing also bodily image (Raich, 2000) and, in a more specific fashion, in the concern for not developing figures of obesity (Ramos, Pérez de Eulate, Liberal & Latorre, 2003). In the third place, the circle of acquaintances, as a social agent that carries an increasing role in the transit from childhood to adolescence, (Grazia, 2010), is crucial in this process of creation of the image that the mind creates of our own body (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010), out of a comparison among peers, which leads to a better valuation within the group or, on the contrary, to the difficulty of being accepted within the group, a social marginalization among equals (De la Torre, García, Villa & Casanova, 2008).

As regards the sex of the subject, the research carried out by López, Findling y Abramzón (2006) attained results in which the boys reflected better self-perception than girls, with the great influence of their context for establishing their self-concept (Gómez-Mármol, Sánchez-Alcaraz & Mahedero, 2013). The influence on self-perceptions of this social pressure to which Rodríguez-Fernández et al. (2013) allude, confirms that young women are more concerned about losing weight and young men about losing weight and increasing their muscle mass, in agreement with the results obtained by McCabe and Ricciardelli (2005) and Sánchez-Alcaraz and Gómez-Mármol (2014). This young group of population motivated to losing weight is constituted by overweight boys and girls who, either are overweight themselves, or perceive themselves as being so (Ingledew & Sullivan, 2002), a fact which stresses again the genre differences in the field of appearance self-perception. Numbers may be brought up to support this reality when we refer to the research carried out by Montero et al. (2004): 52.3% of men and 38.7% of women choose models who correspond to their own real Body Mass Index (BMI), that is, men perceive themselves more accurately than women (lesser distortion). 29.2% of men see themselves with less adiposity than they have and 18.5% with a greater degree of adiposity. On the other hand, 8.6% of young women perceive themselves with less adiposity than they have, and 41.1% perceive themselves with greater adiposity.

It is observed that misalignments in body self-perception, in addition to problems at the level of physical health, such as associated eating disorders (Boschi et al., 2003) and at a psychological level, such as depressions (Blaine, 2008) and suicide attempts (De la Torre, Cubillas Rodríguez, Román Pérez & Valdez, 2009; García-Baamonde, Blázquez-Alonso & Pozueco-Romero, 2014), also bear an impact at a social level, for instance, in the frequency of events of

school violence (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt & Caspi, 2005; Unikel & Gómez-Peresmitré, 2004). Along these lines, García & Madraza (2005) and Tejero, Balsalobre and Ibáñez (2009) defend that changes in behavior (such as those that may derive from an insufficient satisfaction with their own body image), which bring about the consequent difficulties for integration among peers previously mentioned, may lead to acts of violence in school as part of their search for social recognition.

School violence is considered, also, another area of knowledge that raises the interest of the scientific community (Gázquez, Pérez-Fuentes, Lucas & Fernández, 2009), a consequence of the increase in incidents of school harassment shown by a number of sociological investigations (González-Pérez, 2007; Sánchez-Alcaraz, Gómez-Mármol, Valero, De la Cruz & Díaz-Suárez, 2014; Tórrego, 2006) being therefore, as warned by García and Madraza (2005) and Tejero, Ibáñez and Pérez (2008), a problem for which no solution has yet been found. This phenomenon is even more worrisome if we pay attention to the data about its prevalence; the Instituto de Evaluación y Asesoramiento Educativo points out that 49% of school children admit having been insulted or criticized at school, whereas 13% admit to having harassed their peers (Ruiz et al., 2006). Or else to studies carried out in Latin America, which reflect that between 13% and 16% of students admit having taken weapons to school (Viscardi, 2003), 71% admit having been verbally abused at some point in school, and up to 36% affirm that they have taken part in several fights in school hours (UNESCO, 2001).

However, as Rodríguez-Fernández et al. (2013) and Shiraishi et al. (2014) point out, at the present moment publications that try to relate the influence of body image disorders with suffered and/or observed violence are still insufficient. Along these lines, Gómez-Mármol et al. (2013) highlight that a negative self-perception may function as a risk factor of numerous issues during childhood. In fact, it is linked to a greater predisposition towards anxiety and failure to adapt (Acevedo & Carrillo, 2010) at the same time as it manages to predict aggression, antisocial behavior and delinquency in children and adolescents (Donnellan et al., 2005). Meanwhile Reckdenwald, Mancini y Beauregard (2014) made the point that a good self-image perception is related to the development of feelings of self-confidence, which, according to Valdés and Martínez (2014), are factors that help the young not to perceive violence as a means of integration and status achievement within their social context. This way, intending to contribute to this gap in scientific knowledge (Levandoski & Cardoso, 2013), this research has three aims: in the first place, to know the prevalence of subjects that are dissatisfied with their physical appearance, secondly, to know the evolution of school violence from the perspective of teenagers and, in the third place, to analyze the possible relation that may exist between the aforesaid dissatisfaction and the evolution of school violence.

As a starting hypothesis, regarding the first of the proposed aims, genre differences are assumed as regards self-image perception, finding fewer dissatisfied subjects among boys than among girls, as supported by the

conclusions of Ramos, Rivera and Moreno (2010). Similarly, in relation to the knowledge of the evolution of violence in the school context, we hypothesize about the increase in school violence as the subject advances in its adolescence, in consonance with the results of Ros (2011) and, finally, in that which concerns the relation between body image and school violence, we propose as a hypothesis that the subjects with a greater body volume, like those who suffer a distortion in their body-image will be involved in incidents of violence more frequently, as Levandoski and Cardoso (2013) affirm.

## METHOD AND MATERIALS

We have used a methodology of a quantitative kind, which answers to a non-experimental study of a transversal character, where studies of a descriptive and a relational kind are combined. This has allowed us to obtain from the sample subjects the information that we were looking for.

### Participants

The participating sample was made up of a total of 284 school children (155 boys and 129 girls) of the Murcia Region with ages ranging between the 12 and the 17 years of age (M: 14,51; SD: 1,29). The sample constitution was carried out through a non-probabilistic sample process of an accidental or casual kind (Thomas & Nelson, 2007).

### Instruments

*School violence.* In order to measure school violence we used the Cuestionario de Violencia Escolar Cotidiana (CUVECO), validated by Fernández-Baenal et al. (2011). It is a questionnaire that is made up of 14 items preceded by the introductory sentence: "Answer if, in this school year, the following has happened in your classroom." It is made up of two factors, the violence suffered with 8 items (e.g. "they have punched or kicked me") and an internal consistency of  $\alpha = 0,76$  and perceived violence with 6 items (e.g. "students start fights") and an internal consistency of  $\alpha = 0,82$ . It has an answer format in a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents never, and 5, always.

*Body-image self-perception.* For the study of body-image self-perception we used the BODY SHAPE questionnaire, designed by Stunkard, Sorensen and Schulsinger (1983), in the Spanish version translated by Tomás (1998), which contains 9 masculine and feminine figures ordered from lower to higher BMI (values unknown by the surveyed subjects), for which they must point out in the first place that figure with which they identify the most (perceived image) and secondly the desirable one, in so much as it represents the ideal which he would like to resemble (desired image).

## Procedure

The delivery of the questionnaire took place in the school center, during school hours, with the collaboration of the classroom teacher and the presence of the research team, guaranteeing the suitability of the conditions under which it was filled up, at the same time as the participants were reminded of their anonymity and the importance of not leaving any section unanswered. The time required for filling it up was approximately some 10 minutes. No difficulty regarding the understanding of the items was registered.

## Statistical analysis

The statistical treatment of the data was carried out by means of the SPSS 21.0 packet. Tests were carried out in order to know the parametrical or non-parametrical distribution of the scale-type variables (Kolmogorov-Smirnov with the variables in age, satisfaction and violence levels) and categorical ( $\chi^2$  with the genre variable), association tests (U by Mann Whitney between sex and satisfaction level with body self-image to verify the first proposed hypothesis), and of regression (multinomial logistical regression between the aforesaid satisfaction and the levels of perceived and suffered violence, as well as simple lineal regression so as to know the capacity of the choice of one or another figure to which associate resemblance following the questionnaire of Stunkard et al (1983) to predict satisfaction with self-image and the levels of suffered and observed violence).

## RESULTS

The analysis of the statistics descriptive of the relation between the figure which the surveyed subjects point to as most resembling themselves and that which they would like to resemble (level of satisfaction with one's own body-image) is reflected in Table 1, where a prevalence of these subjects among boys, girls, and the total of the participating sample may be observed:

**Table 1.** Prevalence of dissatisfaction with body-image self-perception by genre.

	Boys		Girls		Total	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
Satisfied <sup>1</sup>	44	28,4	25	19,4	69	24,3
Little dissatisfied <sup>2</sup>	87	56,1	87	67,4	174	61,3
Very dissatisfied <sup>3</sup>	24	15,5	17	13,2	41	14,4

<sup>1</sup>Participants for whom the figure they resemble and the figure they would like to resemble is the same.

<sup>2</sup>Participants for whom the difference between the figure they resemble and the one they would like to resemble is of one figure.

<sup>3</sup>Participants for whom the difference between the figure they resemble and the one they would like to resemble is of, at least, two figures.

This figure shows a high level of dissatisfaction with one's own body-image, since more than 75% of the sample is not satisfied with their self-perception, this figure being even higher (higher than 80%) among girls than among boys, although these differences between sexes do not reach the statistical significance of the U test of Mann Whitney.

As to the evolution of school violence through adolescence, Figure 1 shows the fluctuations that take place in it, both for suffered violence as for perceived violence:

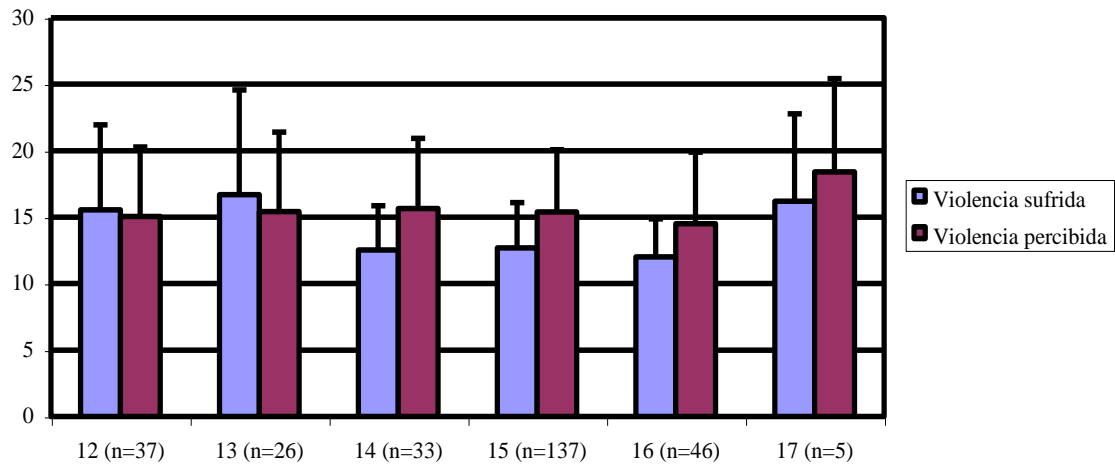


Figure 1. Evolution of suffered and perceived violence by age.

It may be observed that, whereas perceived violence remains stable as the age of the participants gets higher, suffered violence, on the other hand, has a tendency to decrease, just as may be seen from the results of the Pearson Correlation Coefficient test ( $p < 0,001$ ;  $r = -0,249$ ). Although we may notice the increase that takes place at 17 years of age, that is a result that must be interpreted with care, given the low number of school children that are a part of this group (only 5) and that, furthermore, were all students who had repeated a school year, which may bear an impact in these results of suffered violence.

Likewise, regarding the existing relation between the self-concept of body image in adolescents and school violence, multinomial logistical regression gives the following results (Table 2):

**Table 2.** Relation between school violence (suffered and perceived) and satisfaction with one's body image.

School Violence	Satisfaction with body image Satisfied <sup>3</sup>
<b>Suffered violence.</b> <sup>1</sup>	
Violence	3,56 (1,42-8,86)**
None or little violence	4,34 (1,83-10,32)**
<b>Perceived violence.</b> <sup>2</sup>	
Violence	0,78 (0,39-1,54)
None or little violence.	1,06 (0,54-2,09)

<sup>1</sup> Reference group: Much suffered violence.

<sup>2</sup> Reference group: Much perceived violence.

<sup>3</sup> Reference group: Dissatisfied.

\*\*p < 0,1

A higher probability of the subjects classified as satisfied with their own body image to belong to the groups that suffer less violence may be observed or, expressed in a different way, school children who suffer greater violence are, in turn, those who have a worse self-concept of their body-image. Furthermore, these levels of dissatisfaction may be predicted by the figure which the participants select as most resembling them, finding through simple lineal regression that the capacity of prediction of this variable is of up to 82.7% for insatisfaction ( $F = 601,01$ ;  $p = 0,000$ ), 43% for suffered violence ( $F = 64,02$ ;  $p = 0,000$ ) and 19.4% for perceived violence ( $F = 11,06$ ;  $p = 0,001$ ). This way is shown that those participants who point themselves out as being more obese, are also those who suffer the most violence, and who perceive the most violence in their context.

## DISCUSSION

Adolescence is considered a stage of character (Vacek et al., 2010) and personality (Steel et al., 2008) formation, as well as of establishing the basis of perception of one's own body-image (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2004). This establishment of one's self-concept of physical appearance is modulated, among other factors, by social pressure, through the imposition of an ideal image associated to a slender body in girls and athletic in boys (Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2013). The consequences of these models are more obvious in girls (Castillo-Mayén & Montes-Berges, 2014; Gómez-Mármol et al., 2013) in relation to the greater prevalence of girls who claim being dissatisfied with their bodies than boys, as is shown in the results of this research, which, at the same time, coincide with those of Grabe et al. (2008) and Ramos et al. (2010). Therefore, the starting hypothesis proposed in the introduction is thus far fulfilled. This greater pressure may be due to the association that is realized, specially among the feminine sex, between thinness and beauty (Tanaka, Itoh &



Hattori, 2002); in fact, there are studies who verify that eating disorders, the apparition of which is commonly found with the dissatisfaction or distortion of one's own body-image (Boschi et al., 2003), is also much more frequent among women than among men (Anaya, 2004), especially during adolescence (Ramos et al., 2003).

On the other hand, regarding violence in the school context, high values of perceived and suffered violence among adolescent have been found. With regard to this, we may highlight that the participants in the investigation are in a period of their lives in which, were they to suffer problems of school victimization, throughout the years, the probability of turning aggressors themselves, surrounded by violence, increase, according to the conclusions reached by Freire, Veiga y Ferreira (2006) or even belonging to groups characterized by vandalic acts of extreme violence (Martín, Scandroglio, Martínez & López, 2015). Likewise, other investigations have already verified the highest levels of school violence among students of secondary education as opposed to students of primary education (Aguilar, Sroufe, Egeland & Carlson, 200; Sánchez-Alcaraz, Díaz & Valero, 2014), although its evolution within adolescent, according to Ros, (2011) is a field that must still be studied in greater depth.

To this effect, this investigation has observed stability in the levels of perceived violence, and a tendency towards diminution of suffered violence, in opposition to the results of Ros (2011) upon which was based the starting hypothesis, which made us expect an increase in violence as the participants left their adolescence behind and advanced towards adulthood. The stability in the levels of perceived violence are a reflection of the fact that, in the school centers in which this research was carried out, the episodes of violence acquire a regularity in their incidence regardless of the school year in which students find themselves (Gázquez et al., 2009) whereas the progressive diminution of suffered violence (given the stability of perceived violence), may be interpreted in two ways; in the first place, as the reorientation of violent conducts, to others that do not imply a harassed subject (as may be the mistreatment of school material and facilities) or, in the second place, the greater difficulty for adolescents of a higher age to recognize that they are victims of school violence.

With regards to the change in the kind of violence conduct that takes place as age increases, Sánchez-Alcaraz et al. (2014), by means of direct observational methodology verified that among subjects of 11 and 12 years of age, the most habitual disruptive behaviors were aggressions of a verbal kind (insults), remaining stable or even increasing the frequency with which these behaviors took place among adolescents of 15 and 16 years of age. However, in this older group, insults were so frequent that they had lost their hurtful character, and were used directly as the means with which to address the classmate. Furthermore, the most habitual kind of disruptive behavior in this second group were acts of disrespect towards the teacher (interruptions and disobedience). As to the second possible explanation of the changes that take place in

perceived and suffered violence during adolescence, Espelage and Swearer (2010) explain that acts of violence are usually committed by the subjects of greater physical power, that is, those of greater physiological maturation, over their less developed peers. In this way, the school children of a greater age who may not have reached the physical development that's proper to their age, in addition to the dissatisfaction with their self-image that may be associated with this fact (Gómez-Mármol et al., 2013), may have greater difficulties to recognize that they are victims of school harassment (Espelage & Swearer, 2010).

Finally, as regards this relation between the previous variables, that is, body-image self-perception and school violence, this research has shown that those participants who are dissatisfied with their body image tend to be part of the groups that suffer greater violence at school, just as De la Torre et al. (2008) and Needham and Crosnoe (2005) affirm. Analogously, this phenomenon is also produced in those subjects who perceive themselves as more obese, in consonance with the conclusions by Donnellan et al. (2005), which may be understood, not obviating the importance in this process of the distortion in self-image (Gómez-Mármol et al., 2013), as meaning that the more obese adolescents tend to be victims of school harassment. These results confirm our starting hypothesis which defended the establishment of such a relation, just as Levandoski and Cardoso (2013) had previously found.

Levandoski and Cardoso (2013) defend that the most obese adolescents are those who usually participate to a lesser extent in physical activities at school, which may be a good area for the promotion of positive social relations (Gómez-Mármol, De la Cruz & Valero, 2014) or, when they do participate, tend to show inferior skills, facts which, according to these authors, may contribute to make them belong to those groups with "less power" in the hierarchy of relations between peers and, consequently, to suffer violence in this context. In this sense, from the results of this study it may be observed that school students whose body image is far from the canons imposed by each society (Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2013) tend to suffer rejection from their peers (Shiraishi et al., 2014), especially in their stage of character formation (Vacek et al., 2010) which provides this social problem with an even greater gravity.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This article aims at knowing the prevalence of subjects that are dissatisfied with their body self-concept, assuming as a hypothesis that the degree of discontent will be higher among girls than among boys. The results show that, for both sexes, the percentage of dissatisfied adolescents is high, although it is still higher for girls, satisfying thus far our starting hypothesis. Likewise, the investigation has as a second aim the study of the evolution of school violence among teenagers, having found that, whereas perceived violence remains stable through adolescence, suffered violence tends to decrease, refuting the hypothesis of an increase in the levels of violence as age increases, supported by the results of Ros (2011).

Furthermore, this article analyzes the influence that exists between the variables of body-image self-perception and school violence, satisfying the hypothesis that dissatisfied subjects testify having taken in more episodes in which they suffered violence, although this relation is not found for perceived violence. Lastly, we may highlight that those subjects who perceive themselves as more obese are, at the same time, those who are the most dissatisfied with their body image and those who obtain the highest levels in the scales of perceived and suffered school violence.

Thus, from the results reached in the present article, it is proposed in the way of practical applications that, in school contexts, it should be considered that a low self-concept of one's own image may be behind episodes of violence, in other words, that it may act as a mediator in this kind of behavior. In this way, the design of programs of intervention about school violence must consider the subjects that are dissatisfied with their body image as a special collective to pay particular attention to (Sánchez-Alcaraz, López-Jaime, Valero-Valenzuela & Gómez-Mármol, 2017).

From all the preceding discussion, it may be suggested the realization of new studies that, covering the main limitation of this study with regards to the size of the sample (and the influence of the few participants of 17 years of age for the interpretation of the results), also analyze the role that body-image distortion (understood as the difference between perceived image and real image) has in the process of establishing this self-concept, and, at the same time, its relation with school violence. Furthermore, the realization of interviews may cover some of the limitations that the tool of the questionnaire is unable to solve (Choi & Park, 2005).

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