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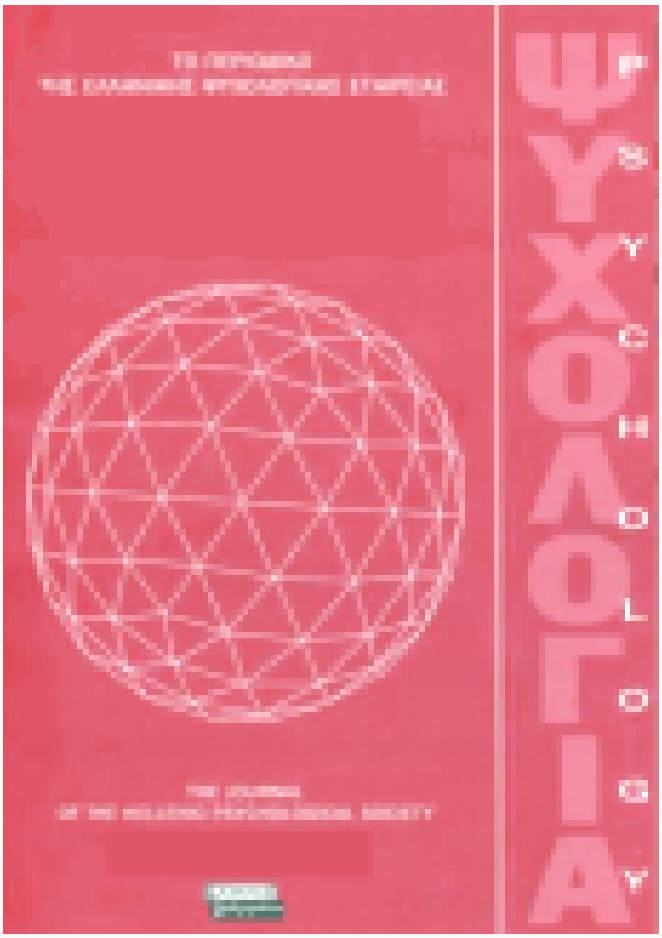

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Self-esteem, social identity and school achievement in adolescence

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ABSTRACT Following several studies on the relationship between self-concept, self-esteem and school performance, we tried to identify which strategies are activated by academically unsuccessful adolescents in order to protect their self-esteem. The sample consisted of 139 students attending 9th grade in two schools in the district of Beja. Data were collected using Harter's Self-Concept Scale for Adolescents and a questionnaire adapted from the work of Palmonari, Pombeni, and Kirchler (1990, 1992, 1994), for the characterisation of the participant, the participant's group (in-group) and of another group considered to be totally different from his/her own (out-group). Statistical analysis (t-test and MANOVA) performed on the data showed that unsuccessful students have values of self-esteem similar to those of successful students, despite their academic self-perception being significantly lower. Results also showed that unsuccessful students have more favourable self-perceptions in the area of romantic appeal and give less importance to school-related areas (school competence and behavioral conduct) than their successful peers. Finally, it was shown that successful students differentiate themselves more clearly from the out-group than unsuccessful ones.

Key words: Self-concept, Self-esteem, Social identity.

The main objective of the present study was to have a better understanding of the relationship between self-esteem and school performance. Following several studies which show that successful and unsuccessful students have the same levels of self-esteem (Alves Martins, 1998; Peixoto, 1998; Robinson & Tayler, 1986, 1991; Senos, 1996) we tried to identify which strategies are activated for the protection of self-esteem by adolescents who are unsuccessful at school.

Several authors distinguish self-concept (as self-perception, i.e., cognitive aspects of the self-concept), from self-esteem (the affective aspect of the self-concept) (Harter, 1985, 1993; Oosterwegel & Oppenheimer, 1993). Although there is a relationship between self-concept and self-esteem, the two constructs represent two different psychological entities, which capture distinct aspects of the representation of the self. The former is a fundamentally cognitive and contextualised component of the representation individuals have of themselves, whilst the latter is

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a more affective and non-contextualised component of this self-representation.

Self-concept can be considered as having a multidimensional structure and defined as the way in which one perceives oneself in various fields of competence (Harter, 1985; Hattie, 1992; Marsh, 1986; Oosterwegel & Oppenheimer, 1993). As persons develop in multiple contexts and involve themselves with different tasks they form cognitions about their performance in these situations. Self-perceptions regarding the different fields of competence are influenced not only by performance in each corresponding field, but also by attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of significant others, such as parents, teachers and partners (Eccles, 1993; Harter 1993; Marsh & Craven, 1991).

In contrast to self-concept, self-esteem can be considered as having a unidimensional structure (Hattie, 1992) and defined as the way one expresses his/her feelings with respect to oneself, feelings which are global and not divided into specific areas or fields. According to Campbell and Lavallee (1993) self-esteem is less permeable to variations than self-concept.

Self-esteem is a component of the assessment of the self and expresses the distance, which separates the real self from the ideal self. However, according to Harter (1993), self-esteem can be affected by dimensions of the self-concept, which are valued by each individual.

It is normally accepted that the development of self-concept and of self-esteem is strongly influenced by social factors (Carstensen, 1993; Hattie, 1992; Harter, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1993; Oosterwegel & Oppenheimer, 1993). On the one hand, persons use standards of assessment which enable themselves to judge their performance and which are appropriated through interactions with other members of their culture; on the other hand, these self-assessments are based on comparisons with a reference group, as illustrated by the metaphor "big fish, little pond" (Marsh, 1987). Lastly, self-concept and self-esteem are influenced by significant others' perceptions of oneself.

The social construction of the self-concept has been clearly demonstrated by several studies which find a significant relationship between self-descriptions of individuals and assessments by significant others (Eccles, 1993; Marsh & Craven, 1991; Pierrehumbert, Plancherel, & Jankech-Caretta, 1987). With respect to self-esteem, several authors showed that it depends upon the degree of social support one receives from significant others (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995; Harter, 1990, 1993; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994).

Several studies have shown that there are correlations between school performance and academic self-concept (Hattie, 1992; Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 1992; Marsh, 1990; Shunk, 1990; Veiga, 1987). Also, longitudinal studies have provided evidence that variations in the academic self-concept are related to performance in school (Hattie, 1992; Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 1992).

Thus, a lowering of the academic self-concept may represent a threat to self-esteem if the academic field is valued by the person (Senos, 1996). Under these circumstances, the question is which strategies could possibly be activated by the person in order to protect self-esteem which is threatened by a negative self-perception with respect to academic competence.

Harter (1993) suggests that one of the possible ways for maintaining acceptable levels of self-esteem is through the reorganisation of the self-concept so that the person stops investing in areas which present a threat to self-esteem and invests in areas which are potentially more gratifying. Robinson and Tayler (1986, 1991), based on the theoretical contributions of Tajfel (1972), Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Turner (1981) regarding the procedures for forming social differentiation and social identity, refer to yet another strategy for the protection of self-esteem: to join a group which, through mechanisms of social differentiation, would enable the person to build a positive social identity and therefore maintain acceptable levels

of self-esteem. Robinson and Tayler (1986, 1991) stated that the construction of a positive social identity is achieved through the devaluation of school culture and the valorisation of anti-school behaviors, such as smoking, painting school walls or arguing with teachers and peers.

The role of peer groups in adolescence. Several studies have shown that the major means of socialisation of adolescents is via the relationships formed in peer groups (Kirchler, Palmonari, & Pombeni, 1991, 1994; Palmonari, Pombeni, & Kirchler, 1989; Sherif, 1984). In fact, for all adolescents, regardless of gender, social class and academic grade, the peer group is decisive in determining the different developmental tasks such as those related to the experience of puberty, autonomy and social insertion and those related to problem solving in school (Palmonari, Pombeni, & Kirchler, 1990).

This peer group, which adolescents generally seek and identify with, may be a formal one, that is, a group they meet at specified times and places, with the purpose of pursuing a specific pre-established aim, such as, a football group, a scouts group, a drama group; or it may be an informal one, which meets in several places and times without any pre-established aim, as the case of a group of friends. Currently in Portugal, school context is a privileged one, since it is one where peer groups are formed, regardless of their formal or informal nature and considered to be an essential developmental aid (Gouveia Pereira, 1996).

The motives underlying adolescents' decision to meet in groups are the fact that they feel that their peers have identical needs and difficulties related to the process of growing up and the possibility of sharing with them the same problems, the same activities and the same feelings. This sharing enables them to observe the strategies used by peers to solve problems identical to their own and, at the same time, to see how these strategies work (Coleman & Hendry, 1990). These common experiences and the shared building of strategies for problem solving, with their subsequent processes of comparison, differentiation and identification, are at the basis of a set of values and rules which help adolescents to build their identity (Palmonari, Pombeni, & Kirchler, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992; Kirchler et al., 1994). Several studies have shown that a high level of identification with the peer group enables the adolescent to build a positive image of him/herself directly related to both the performance on developmental tasks, namely, socio-institutional tasks which are concerned with school problems, and the entering the professional world and building their own identity (Palmonari et al., 1991).

Differences in self-esteem are not commonly found between successful and unsuccessful students. Knowing that poor school performance can lead to the lowering of academic self-concept and this, in turn, presents a threat to self-esteem if the academic field is valued by the student, one of the strategies that unsuccessful students can mobilise in order to protect their self-esteem can be the devaluation of school-related areas and the valorisation of other self-concept areas. On the other hand, the peer group plays a critical role in adolescence both for identity building and for solving several developmental tasks including those related to school performance. Therefore, another strategy to protect self-esteem can be related to the construction of a positive social identity, based on processes of identification with the in-group and differentiation from the out-group.

Aims and hypotheses

The first aim of this study was to investigate if there were differences in self-esteem between adolescents who are successful at school and those who are not. Several researchers have suggested that faced to low school results students would develop mechanisms of protection in order to maintain self-esteem at acceptable levels (Alves Martins, 1998; Peixoto, 1998; Robinson & Tayler, 1986, 1991; Senos, 1996). Therefore our first hypothesis was: there

are no differences in self-esteem in academically successful adolescents and academically unsuccessful ones (Hypothesis 1).

The second aim was to identify which strategies could possibly be activated by adolescents who are not successful at school in order to protect their self-esteem which is threatened by a negative self-perception regarding academic competence. Harter (1993) suggested that adolescents with low school results value other areas of self-concept in which they consider themselves to be competent. On the other hand, Robinson and Tayler (1986, 1991) stated that the protection of self-esteem is achieved through mechanisms of group identification and social differentiation. Thus, we established the following hypothesis:

There are differences between these two groups of students regarding their self-perceptions: successful students have more favourable self-perceptions in areas related to school (school competence and behavioral conduct) whilst unsuccessful students have more favourable self-perceptions in areas related to interpersonal dimensions (social acceptance, romantic appeal, close relationships) or in areas related to extra-school activities that are socially valued (athletic competence) (Hypothesis 2).

There are differences in the importance given to the various areas of self-concept by the two groups of students. Successful students give greater importance to school competence and behavioral conduct whilst unsuccessful students give greater importance to the areas where their self-perceptions are more favourable (Hypothesis 3).

There are differences in the degree of identification with the peer group between successful and unsuccessful students. Unsuccessful students identify more with their in-group and differentiate themselves more clearly from the out-group than successful students (Hypothesis 4).

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 139 students from two schools in the district of Beja, in the south of Portugal, who attended 9th grade in the school year of 1995/96. Of these 139 students, their age ranging from 14 to 18 years, 49 had never failed in previous years and had achieved passing marks at the end of the second term of the 9th grade; 44 had never failed in previous years, but had not achieved passing marks in more than two disciplines at the end of the second term of 9th grade; and 46 had failed at least once in previous years and had not achieved passing marks at the end of the second term of the 9th grade.

Successful and unsuccessful school performances were classified in the following way: those who had never failed in previous years and had achieved passing marks at the end of the second term of the 9th grade were considered to have successful school performance; those who failed in previous years and those who had not failed in previous years but had not achieved passing marks at the end of the second term of the 9th grade were considered to have unsuccessful performance. Therefore, the group of successful students was made up of 49 students, whilst the group of unsuccessful students was made up of 90 students.

Tasks and procedure

To collect the data related to self-concept and self-esteem, we used Harter's (1988) Self-Concept Scale for Adolescents, adapted to the Portuguese population (Peixoto, Alves Martins, Mata, & Monteiro, 1996, 1997). This scale consists of two parts: the Self-Perception Profile and the Importance Scale.

The *Self-Perception Profile Scale* has 32 items distributed among 8 subscales referring to School Competence (e.g., "Some teenagers are

pretty slow in finishing their school work BUT Other teenagers can do their school work more quickly"), Social Acceptance (e.g., "Some teenagers are popular with others of their age BUT Other teenagers are not very popular"), Athletic Competence (e.g., "Some teenagers do very well at all kinds of sports BUT Other teenagers don't feel that they are very good when it comes to sports"), Physical Appearance (e.g., "Some teenagers are not happy with the way they look BUT Other teenagers are happy with the way they look"), Romantic Appeal (e.g., "Some teenagers usually don't go out with the people they would really like to date BUT Other teenagers do go out with people they really want to date"), Behavioral Conduct (e.g., "Some teenagers do things they know they shouldn't do BUT Other teenagers hardly ever do things they know they shouldn't do"), Close Relationships (e.g., "Some teenagers do have a close friend they can share secrets with BUT Other teenagers do not have a really close friend they can share secrets with") and to Self-Esteem (e.g., "Some teenagers are often disappointed with themselves BUT Other teenagers are pretty pleased with themselves").

The *Importance Scale* consists of 14 items, 2 for each of the above areas in the Self-Perception Profile (example for School Competence: "Some teenagers don't think that doing well in school is really that important BUT Other teenagers think that doing well in school is important"). In both the Self-perception Profile and the Importance Scale each item describes two different groups of youths. The participant first is asked to identify himself with one of these groups and then say whether the description is "sort of true" or "really true" for him (see example in Figure 1).

The different items were coded from 1 to 4, where 1 indicated low perceived competence, or a low importance given and 4 indicated high-perceived competence or high importance given. The average for each subscale was subsequently calculated.

In order to assess the level of identification with the peer group, we used the *Questionnaire of Group Characterisation,* adapted from the work of Palmonari, Pombeni, and Kirchler (1992), which aimed to characterise the adolescent, his/her peer group and another group considered being totally different from his/her own. This questionnaire had two sections: in the first we asked each adolescent if s/he belonged to a group and, if so, to characterise it. If s/he stated that s/he belonged to more than one group, s/he was asked which was the most important to him/her (the in-group). Afterwards, s/he was asked to name a group completely different from his/her group and to describe it (the out-group). Based on his/her in- and out-groups s/he was asked to fill the second part of the questionnaire which consisted of a list of 20 adjectives. S/he had to characterise him/ferself, his/her group, (the in-group) and the out-group chosen by him/her, using a Likert scale (see Figure 2). The list of 20 adjectives included several of those proposed by Palmonari et al. (1992) and other that were collected from interviews with Portuguese adolescents.

As an index of the difference between oneself, the in-group and the out-group,

Really True for Me	**Sort of True for Me**		**Sort of True for Me**	**Really True for Me**
☐	☐	Some teenagers do very well at their schoolwork BUT	Other teenagers don't do very well at their schoolwork ☐	☐

Figure 1: Subscale item of School Competence from the Self-Perception Profile Scale

Palmonari et al. (1992) used the Euclidean distances between the description of the self, the in-group and the out-group on the 20 adjectives. The items were coded from 1 to 5, where 1 represented "Agree Strongly" and 5 "Disagree Strongly" to the answers given to "Me", "My Group" and "The Other Group". In order to compare the answers to these three items Euclidean distances were calculated: between the self-description and the description of "My Group" (level of identification); between the self-description and the description of "The other group" (level of differentiation) using the following formula:

$$d = \frac{1}{n}\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(Q_{iMe} - Q_{iMyGroup})^2}$$

d = distance between self descriptions and descriptions of the in-group, n = number of items, Q_{iMe} = Self-descriptions on i = 1 to 20 items. Score corresponding to the adolescents' answers to "Me", $Q_{i\ MyGroup}$ = Descriptions of the in-group on i = 1 to 20 items. Score corresponding to the adolescents' answers to "My Group".

To calculate the distance to the out-group $Q_{iMyGroup}$ was replaced by $Q_{iTheOtherGroup}$.

In this way, the smaller the value of the distance to his/her group, the greater the identification of the adolescent with the in-group; the greater the value of the distance to the other group, the greater the differentiation of the adolescent from the out-group.

Data were collected in April 1996 in two different moments with one-week interval. In the first moment, we used Harter's scale. In the second, the Questionnaire of Group Characterisation was passed around. The anonymity of the students was guaranteed by the attribution of a code name to each of them.

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, with respect to self-esteem, there were no significant differences between the two groups, $t(137) = 1.59$, $p = .114$, although the average of successful students was slightly higher than the one of unsuccessful students.

These results enable us to confirm the first hypothesis that was established, in other words,

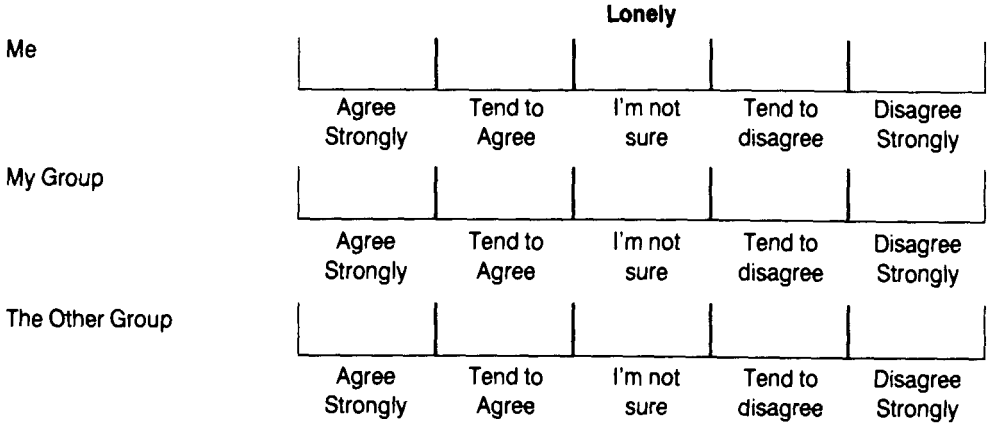

Figure 2: Item of the questionnaire for group characterisation

that there are no differences in the self-esteem of successful and unsuccessful students.

With respect to self-concept, the results obtained with MANOVA, in which academic success (successful vs. unsuccessful) was the between subjects factor and the scores on the Self-Concept Questionnaire the dependent variables, showed that there was a significant main effect of academic success, $F(7, 131) = 6.968$, $p = .000$. Table 2 shows that while the successful students had better results in the areas of school competence, behavioral conduct and close relationships, the unsuccessful ones had better results in the areas of social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance and romantic appeal. The univariate F tests showed that there were significant effects in school competence, $F(1, 137) = 19.310$, $p = .000$, and romantic appeal, $F(1, 137) = 8.145$, $p = .005$, in the first case in favour of successful students and in the second in favour of the unsuccessful ones.

With respect to the data obtained from the Scale of Importance, results obtained with a similar MANOVA showed that there was also a significant main effect of academic success, $F(7, 131) = 3.365$, $p = .002$. Table 3 shows that successful students always had higher averages than unsuccessful students did. The univariate F tests showed that there were significant effects of

Table 1
Mean scores and standard deviations of self-esteem as a function of academic success

	Successful		Unsuccessful	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
SE	3.14	.596	2.98	.568

Note: SE = self-esteem

Table 2
Mean scores and standard deviations of perceived competence as a function of academic success

	Successful		Unsuccessful	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
SC	2.99	.579	2.60	.451
SA	2.95	.454	3.07	.468
AC	2.36	.721	2.59	.628
PA	2.52	.809	2.77	.676
RA	2.44	.648	2.73	.528
BC	2.96	.506	2.82	.523
CR	3.15	.609	3.10	.723

Note: SC = School Competence; SA = Social Acceptance; AC = Athletic Competence; PA = Physical Appearance; RA = Romantic Appeal; BC = Behavioral Conduct; CR = Close Relationships

academic success in the subscales of School Competence, $F(1, 137) = 19.457$, $p = .000$, and Behavioral Conduct $F(1, 137) = 11.937$, $p = .001$.

These results partially confirm the third hypothesis of this study. Successful students attribute greater importance to the areas related to school, although, contrary to what had been predicted, it was also found that unsuccessful students do not attribute greater importance to the areas in which their self-perceptions are more favourable.

With respect to the distances of successful and unsuccessful students from the in-group and the out-group the results obtained with a similar MANOVA showed that there was a significant main effect of academic success, $F(2, 136) = 3.690$, $p = .027$. Table 4 shows that successful students had lower averages than unsuccessful students at the level of in-group distances and higher averages at the level of out-group distances. The univariate F tests showed that there was a significant effect of academic success in the case of the distance to the out-group, $F(1, 137) = 4.336$, $p = .039$.

These results provide evidence supporting the inexistence of differences between successful and unsuccessful students with regard to the relative proximity to the in-group.

Table 3
Mean scores and standard deviations of the importance attributed to various domains of self-concept as a function of academic success

	Successful		Unsuccessful	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
ISC	3.38	.573	2.87	.681
ISA	2.91	.507	2.82	.628
IAC	2.50	.848	2.43	.795
IPA	3.00	.784	2.77	.680
IRA	3.31	.567	3.13	.669
IBC	3.55	.580	3.16	.677
ICR	3.69	.619	3.50	.649

Note: ISC = Importance of School Competence; ISA = Importance of Social Acceptance; IAC = Importance of Athletic Competence; IPA = Importance of Physical Appearance; IRA = Importance of Romantic Appeal; IBC = Importance of Behavioral Conduct; ICR = Importance of Close Relationships

Table 4
Mean scores and standard deviations of the distance of successful and unsuccessful students from their in-group and out-group

	Successful		Unsuccessful	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
In-group	.19	.060	.21	.086
Out-group	.44	.146	.39	.135

The participants from both groups show a high degree of identification with their group.

With regard to the distance from the out-group, it was verified that successful students differentiate themselves more clearly from the out-group than unsuccessful students; this finding lends support to the contention that this is not one of the strategies for the protection of self-esteem.

In order to further analyse the relationships between self-esteem, social identity and academic performance, we divided the unsuccessful students into two groups with contrasting values of self-esteem. The first group, called the low self-esteem group, consisted of 15 adolescents whose scores lay in the lower quartile of the distribution: self-esteem equal to or lower than 2.4. The second group, with high self-esteem, consisted of 13 adolescents whose scores were in the upper quartile: self-esteem equal to or higher than 3.2.

With respect to the self-concept the results obtained with MANOVA, in which the between subjects factor was the level of self-esteem and self-concept scores as dependent variables, showed that there was a significant main effect of self-esteem, $F(7, 20) = 4.427$, $p = .004$.

Inspection of Table 5 provides support for the existence of differences in the organisation of the self-concept between unsuccessful students with a high self-esteem and unsuccessful students with a low self-esteem. Thus, the former had significantly higher values in the areas of social acceptance, $F(1, 26) = 5.338$, $p = .029$, physical appearance, $F(1, 26) = 11.185$, $p = .003$, romantic appeal, $F(1, 26) = 8.405$, $p = .008$, behavioral conduct, $F(1, 26) = 16.800$, $p = .000$, and close relationships, $F(1, 26) = 5.696$, $p = .025$. These more favourable self-perceptions of students with high self-esteem in several areas, namely those related to interpersonal dimensions, appear to constitute one of the strategies for the protection of self-esteem of academically unsuccessful students.

With respect to the importance attributed to the different dimensions of the self-concept, the results obtained with MANOVA showed that there were no effects related to self-esteem, $F(7, 20) = 1.463$, $p = .237$.

Finally, the MANOVA concerning the distance of unsuccessful students with a high and a low self-esteem from the in-group and the

Table 5
Mean scores and standard deviations of perceived competence of unsuccessfull students as a function of self-esteem

	Low Self-Esteem		High Self-Esteem	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
SC	2.52	.439	2.54	.479
SA	2.83	.433	3.18	.378
AC	2.56	.601	2.66	.768
PA	2.44	.685	3.22	.513
RA	2.53	.129	3.05	.118
BC	2.35	.456	3.06	.465
CR	2.87	.712	3.51	.705.

Note:SC = School Competence; SA = Social Acceptance; AC = Athletic Competence; PA = Physical Appearance; RA = Romantic Appeal; BC = Behavioral Conduct; CR = Close Relationships

out-group showed that self-esteem did not have a significant effect on the reported distances, $F(2, 25) = 2.898, p = .074$.

Conclusions

The results obtained from the research carried out in these two schools showed that unsuccessful students, despite having lower levels of academic self-concept than successful students, do not present significantly lower levels of self-esteem. It was also shown that unsuccessful students when compared to successful students maintain satisfactory levels of self-esteem by means of a double mechanism to which Harter (1993) refers as: greater perceived competence in other areas of the self-concept (in our study Romantic Appeal) and depreciation of the importance attributed to areas related to school (School Competence and Behavioural Conduct). The tendency for unsuccessful students to present greater perceived competence in areas that are not related to school is confirmed when contrasting unsuccessful students from the point of view of self-esteem. In effect, those who maintained higher levels of self-esteem perceived themselves more favourably in several areas, namely those related to interpersonal dimensions (Social Acceptance, Romantic Appeal and Close Relationships).

The results obtained with respect to the perceived competence in the dimension of Behavioral Conduct, where unsuccessful students with a high self-esteem perceived themselves more favourably than those with a low self-esteem, do not seem to corroborate the findings of Robinson and Tayler (1986, 1991). These authors stated that unsuccessful students, in order to protect their self-esteem, would devaluate school culture and value anti-school behaviors. In our study unsuccessful students with a high self-esteem considered their behavior to be closer to the one valued by school. Consequently, it appears that the protection of self-esteem is not achieved by this strategy.

On the other hand, our results showed that processes of group identification and differentiation do not seem to play a significant role in the maintenance of a positive self-esteem in unsuccessful students when compared to successful ones. However, this does not mean that the peer group is not important for the construction of self-esteem through, for example, the social support for building positive images in the areas of self-concept where adolescents achieve good performances. As Harter (1993) suggests, self-esteem can be affected by the social support received by the individual.

To sum up, these results seem to support Harter's (1993) model of self-esteem maintenance and to contradict Robinson and Tayler's (1986, 1990). The maintenance of self-esteem of unsuccessful students appears to be due to the existence of higher self-perceptions of competence in other areas of the self-concept that are not related to school and through the devaluation of the areas related to school.

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