*The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 155*(4), 487–492

# Reliability of the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children and Predictors of Global Self-Worth

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ABSTRACT. Harter's (1985) Self-Perception Profile for Children is one of the measures most widely used by developmental social psychologists. The aim of the present study was to investigate the test–retest reliability of the subscales for 24 children over a 3-year period. The results show that scores on the global self-worth subscale at age 8 correlated highly with scores at age 11 ($r$ = .61) and did not change over time, $t(23) = 0.22$. These results suggest that perceptions of global self-worth remain highly stable. However, domain-specific measures of competence did not show the same level of stability. Harter (1990) has suggested that global self-worth is a function of domain-specific measures. The relationship between global self-worth and the domain-specific measures was also investigated at each age; although the perception of physical appearance was the single best predictor of global self-worth at both age 8 and age 11, the second best predictor at age 8 was perception of social acceptance, whereas at age 11 it was scholastic competence.

HARTER (1990) HAS ARGUED that by 8 years of age the child has constructed a view of his or her general self-worth over and above self-perceptions of specific competences of cognitive and physical skills. To measure the various domains of competence and adequacy, as well as global evaluations about the self after the age of 8 years, Harter originally developed the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC; Harter, 1982). Test-

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retest reliability on the original four subscales of the PCSC (cognitive competence, social competence, athletic ability, and global esteem) ranged from 0.70 to 0.87 over a period of 3 months for 208 Colorado pupils, and from 0.69 to 0.80 over a period of 9 months for 810 New York pupils (Harter, 1982).

The PCSC, however, has since been revised by Harter as the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC; Harter, 1985). The SPPC comprises five domain-specific subscales and one global self-worth subscale. The domain-specific subscales are Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Athletic Competence, Physical Appearance, and Behavioral Conduct. Harter (1985) reported factor-analytic data that confirmed the use of these subscales and internal reliabilities of between 0.71 and 0.86 for the subscales over four samples of children.

Our purpose in the present study was to investigate the test–retest properties of the SPPC for children between the ages of 8 and 11 years. We were also interested in whether certain domains contribute more than others as predictors of global self-worth. Harter (1990) suggested that physical appearance is the most important contributor to children's global self-worth. Therefore, we also sought to investigate the associations between scores on the domain-specific subscales and scores on global self-worth.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

One class of Belfast schoolchildren took part in this study. The sample of 24 children (10 boys and 14 girls) completed the SPPC during the spring of 1989 (Time 1) when they were in Primary 4 (8 years old) and again in the spring of 1992 (Time 2) when the children were in Primary 7 (11 years old). All pupils completed the 36-item Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC; Harter, 1985) at both Time 1 and Time 2.

## Results

For the 24 children who completed the SPPC at Time 1 and at Time 2, related *t* tests were computed between scores on each of the SPPC subscales at each time (see Table 1). Higher scores on the global self-worth subscale at Time 1 were strongly associated with higher scores on the global self-worth subscale at Time 2. In addition, no changes in mean scores were observed between Time 1 and Time 2. Scores at Time 1 and Time 2 were significantly associated for the domain-specific measures of physical appearance, scholastic competence, and athletic competence. The mean scores on the athletic-competence and physical-appearance subscales had significantly decreased between Time 1 and Time 2. No significant association, or change, was observed between

**TABLE 1**
**Stability and Changes in Scores Over 3 Years ($N$ = 24)**

| SPPC subscale | Time 1 | | Time 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *r* | *t* |
| Scholastic Competence | 2.94 | 0.68 | 2.64 | 0.58 | .36* | 2.02 |
| Social Acceptability | 2.91 | 0.56 | 2.71 | 0.32 | .29 | 1.78 |
| Athletic Competence | 3.04 | 0.53 | 2.65 | 0.82 | .34* | 2.40* |
| Physical Appearance | 3.05 | 0.82 | 2.54 | 0.78 | .56** | 3.30** |
| Behavioral Conduct | 2.79 | 0.54 | 2.68 | 0.56 | .28 | 0.77 |
| Global Self-worth | 2.80 | 0.71 | 2.77 | 0.67 | .61*** | 0.22 |

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. ($r$: one-tailed test; $t$: two-tailed test.)

the Time 1 and Time 2 measures of behavioral conduct and social acceptance.

Correlations were computed between the SPPC subscale scores at both Time 1 and Time 2 for all the pupils (see Table 2). At Time 2, all domain-specific subscales (except for physical appearance with social acceptance and behavioral conduct with athletic competence) were significantly intercorrelated. At Time 1, however, fewer significant associations were found between the domain-specific measures. A significant association was found between social acceptance and athletic competence, and in contrast to the Time 2 data, a significant association was found between social acceptance and physical appearance. At both times, all domain-specific measures were associated with global self-worth.

We were interested in which domain-specific subscales were the best predictors of global self-worth. The five domain-specific measures at Time 1 were entered in a stepwise regression to predict global self-worth at Time 1. Physical appearance was entered on the first step ($\beta = .70$) and accounted for 47% of the variance, $F(1, 22) = 21.13$, $p < .0001$. On the second step, physical appearance ($\beta = .51$, $p < .003$) and social acceptability ($\beta = .41$, $p < .02$) both accounted for 59% of the variance, $F(2, 21) = 17.26$, $p < .0001$. On the third step, physical appearance ($\beta = .42$, $p < .008$), social acceptability ($\beta = .38$, $p < .02$), and scholastic competence ($\beta = .31$, $p < .03$) together accounted for 66% of the variance, $F(3, 20) = 15.99$, $p < .0001$. No other variables reached significance ($p < .05$).

The five domain-specific measures at Time 2 were entered into a stepwise regression to predict global self-worth at Time 2. On the first step, physical appearance ($\beta = .85$) accounted for 71% of the variance, $F(1, 22) = 57.82$, $p < .0001$. On the second step, physical appearance ($\beta = .69$, $p < .0001$) and scholastic competence ($\beta = .33$, $p < .007$) together accounted for 79% of the

**TABLE 2**
**Correlations Between SPPC Subscales at Time 1 and Time 2 ($N$ = 24)**

| Subscale | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Scholastic Competence | | .22 | .30 | .33 | .22 | .53** |
| 2. Social Acceptance | .49** | | .40* | .46* | .27 | .65** |
| 3. Athletic Competence | .36* | .40* | | .27 | .34 | .39* |
| 4. Physical Appearance | .49** | .30 | .45* | | .34 | .70** |
| 5. Behavioral Conduct | .65** | .42* | .32 | .61** | | .42* |
| 6. Global Self-worth | .66** | .45* | .58** | .85** | .68** | |

*Note.* Time 1 data above the diagonal, Time 2 data below the diagonal.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$ (one-tailed tests).

variance, $F(2, 21) = 43.79, p < .0001$. No other variables reached significance ($p < .05$).

## Discussion

Children's self-perceptions of their global self-worth seem to remain highly stable between the ages of 8 and 11 years. One explanation for this finding is the link between global self-worth and perceptions of physical appearance (these also showed a strong association between Time 1 and Time 2, although the mean score had decreased). Harter (1990) has suggested that physical appearance represents the manifestation of the outer self, whereas self-worth represents the inner self. When all the domain-specific subscales were entered into a regression equation to predict global self-worth, physical appearance emerged as the best predictor at both times.

Although these data seem to highlight the importance of self-perceptions of physical appearance as one determinant of global self-worth, further research is clearly needed to determine the possible social–psychological factors that may operate to moderate this association. For example, Granleese and Joseph (1993) found that physical appearance was the best predictor of global self-worth for 13-year-old girls at a mixed-sex school, whereas behavioral conduct was the best predictor of global self-worth for 13-year-old girls at a single-sex school.

Harter (1990) provided evidence that there is further differentiation between specific domains during adolescence. For example, job competence emerges during the adolescent years and continues into the later periods. For this reason, Harter (1990) developed a series of measures appropriate to older age groups (e.g., the Self-Perception Profile for College Students; Neemann & Harter, 1986) as well as to children under 8 years of age, and there

is much potential for developmental studies of self-concept over a longer period of time. It would be interesting to study the changes in self-perceptions between pre-teenage years and teenage years because this period is marked by significant changes—for example, the development of sexual and physical maturity, the approach of adulthood, and changes in the schooling environment. In the future we hope to conduct follow-up work on these children and their perceptions during their teenage years.

At Time 1, the second-best predictor of global self-worth was social acceptability, whereas at Time 2, the second-best predictor was scholastic competence. Similarly, the strongest association between the domain-specific subscales at Time 1 was between social acceptance and physical appearance, whereas at Time 2 no significant association was obtained between these measures, and social acceptance was most strongly associated with scholastic competence. These results suggest that there may be a shift in values for children between these ages, and doing well at school becomes more relevant to one's popularity and global self-worth. Indeed, the data at Time 2 suggest that there is a tendency for specific domains to become more interrelated as children get older. However, we must emphasize that the data are based on one small class from a Belfast school and may not be generalizable to other populations.

In conclusion, the SPPC is becoming increasingly popular among developmental social psychologists in their research. For example, the SPPC has been used to investigate the effects of bullying at school, and researchers have found that those children who were rated as victims of bullies either by themselves or by their peer group reported lower scores on scholastic competence, social acceptance, behavior conduct, and global self-worth (Neary & Joseph, 1994). We suggest that other professionals, such as educational or clinical psychologists, might also find the SPPC valuable in their assessments of children.

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*Received May 20, 1994*