Factors influencing self-esteem in Tunisian adolescents with prosocial behavior

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ABSTRACT

Background and aim: Previous research has shown some varying results of the link between prosocial behavior and self-esteem among adolescents. However, there is a dearth of studies considering the external factors' impact on self-esteem among those adolescents. Thus, this study aimed to assess self-esteem among a group of adolescents with prosocial behavior in the city of Sfax and to investigate whether their self-esteem would be influenced by individual and familial factors. Methods: We led a transversal study, including 90 adolescents aged 14-20 years and members of voluntary association in Sfax (Tunisia). Self-esteem was measured by Coopersmith self-esteem inventory (SEI). Results: The mean age was 16.59 years with a sex ratio of 0.87 (53.3% female). All the participants were schooled and 30% of them attended high schools. 71.1% were from high-income families and 78.9% of them lived in two-parent families. A rate of 58.9% of adolescents had a high total self-esteem score mainly in the familial and in the social subscales. High total self-esteem was significantly associated with a high parental educational level (p=0.001), a harmonious relationship with parents (p=0.020) and participation in decision-making processes within the family (p=0.009). The academic average was significantly higher in adolescents with high total self-esteem (p=0.001). Conclusion: This study highlighted the role of structural factors such as family's income and interpersonal relationships and emphasized the crucial role of academic success as predictable indicators of high self-esteem.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a period of transition during which teens gradually move away from the protection of their families and turn more to their peers for support and company. Hence, poor interpersonal relationships and perceived lack of social support in adolescence are associated with a perception of poor psychosocial well-being and poor quality of daily life, and with a high risk of developing anxiety and depression[1]. On the other hand, social acceptance increases self-esteem and well-being.

An important predictor of acceptance among peers is prosocial behavior, which is defined as any act with the goal of benefiting another person[2]. In fact, adolescents who show more prosocial behavior are more likely to be accepted by peers than adolescents who show less prosocial behavior[3]. A large amount of empirical research has documented the beneficial role of prosocial behavior for the actor, as well as for the target, as it is associated with better peer relationships[4], higher levels of self-esteem[5], and civic engagement during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood[6].

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From another perspective, self-esteem is one of the main predictors of psychological well-being, and acquiring an adequate level of self-esteem is crucial to adolescent development[7]. Self-esteem is indeed an affective dimension of personal identity, which represents an essential component of self-image. It represents the set of feelings and attitudes that a person experiences with respect to himself, and which guide his spontaneous reactions. It also steers a person's aspirations and influences the project design strategies through past successes and failures[8].

Prosocial behavior might be associated with self-esteem not only during adolescence but also over the long term. In this regard, empirical evidence has shown that the direct effect of pro-sociality on self-esteem was statistically significant during the transition from middle adolescence to young adulthood[5]. In addition to direct evidence, gratitude and acknowledgment often associated with prosocial behavior may promote self-worth and provide a means for bolstering feelings about oneself. In this way, prosocial behavior may foster self-worth and more global self-esteem[9].

In sum, previous research has shown some varying results of the link between prosocial behavior and self-esteem among adolescents. However, there is a dearth of studies considering the external factors' impact on self-esteem among those adolescents.

The objectives of this study were to assess self-esteem among a group of adolescents with prosocial behavior in the city of Sfax and to investigate whether self-esteem would be influenced by individual factors and familial factors of those adolescents.

Methods

Sample and study design

We led a transversal, descriptive and analytical study, over four months, from June until September 2018, based on a survey of a group of 90 adolescents. These adolescents were members of Interact clubs in Sfax (Tunisia) drawn from different Colleges and high schools.

Interact clubs are service clubs for youth ages 12 to 18, sponsored by Rotary International. Being a member of an Interact club gives the opportunity to participate in meaningful service projects and develop leadership skills, understand the importance of responsibility and promote international awareness. It also offers the chance to learn the importance of serving others, showing respect and developing personal integrity.

The average age of the participants was 16.59 ± 1.45 years (range: 13 to 20). The sample was female-dominated (53.3% of cases) with a sex ratio of 0.87. The survey was conducted through face-to-face interview, undertaken by a single interviewer with informed consent of the adolescent and upon prior consent of the Interact club president.

Instruments

These interviews followed a predetermined format, and identified apart for the socio-demographic information concerning the living conditions (mono or biparental family), family circumstances (family income, parents' educational level, parenting style, relationship with parents, communication with parents), schooling (academic attainment, academic average, extracurricular activities), and relational elements (decision making participation, friendship network).

Self-esteem was measured by Coopersmith self-esteem inventory (SEI)[10]. The Coopersmith SEI is a 58-item self-report instrument to which each subject responds by using "like me" or "unlike me". The present study was conducted with the Arabic translation of the Coopersmith SEI, in its school form for the ages 8-15. The Coopersmith SEI was developed through research to assess attitude toward oneself in general, and in specific contexts. This form yields a total score and separate scores for four subscales designed to assess perception of self (General Self-esteem: 26 items), peers (Social Self-esteem: 8 items), parents (familial self-esteem: 8 items), and school (School self-esteem: 8 items). A score higher than 18.64 in general self-esteem subscale, 5.67 in social self-estime subscale, 4.92 in familial self-esteem subscale, 4.12 in school self-esteem subscale and 33.35 in total score indicates a positive self-esteem[10].

Compared with other instruments assessing self-esteem, the Coopersmith SEI seems to be well researched, well documented, and widely used. It is brief and easily scored. It is reliable and stable, and there is an adequate amount of information about its validity[11].

Statistics

The statistical analysis was performed by using the SPSS statistical package, version 20. The Chi-square test and the Fisher test were used to compare frequencies, and the Student test to compare means. *p* values less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results

Sample identification

The sample consisted of 90 adolescents, recruited over a period of four months (June to September 2018). The sex ratio (male/female) was 0.87 with female domination (53.3%). All of these adolescents were schooled and 30% of them attended high schools. Half of them had an academic average of 13 to 15out of 20in the 2017-2018 school year, and 72.1% of them were involved in extracurricular activities (sport in 50% of cases). As for the parents, 66.7% of the fathers and 61.1% of the mothers had a university degree. More than two thirds of the adolescents (71.1%) were from high-income families. The adolescents lived in two-parent families in 78.9% of cases.

Self-esteem assessment

A rate of 58.9%of adolescents had a high total self-esteem score mainly in the familial subscale (54.4%) and in the social subscale (51.1%) (Figure 1).

Mean scores of self-esteem according to the different subscales are represented in table 1 (Table 1).

Relationship between self-esteem and socio-biographic factors

To determine factors associated with self-esteem, we compared the group of adolescents with high self-esteem to that of adolescents with low self-esteem. The total self-esteem of adolescents was independent of their sex, their perception of the parenting style and their friendship network. Adolescents with high total self-esteem were significantly more likely to have a high socioeconomic level, a high parental educational level, a harmonious relationship and satisfactory communication with parents, a participation in decision-making processes within the family, and an extracurricular activity. The academic average (2017-2018 school year) was significantly higher in adolescents with high total self-esteem (Table 2).

Discussion

In the present study, Self-esteem was measured by Coopersmith SEI. This author defines self-esteem as an expression of approval or disapproval toward oneself, representing a sign of the extent to which an individual feels capable, effective and important[10]. According to this inventory, almost 60% of the participants had a high total self-esteem, particularly in familial (54.4%) and social

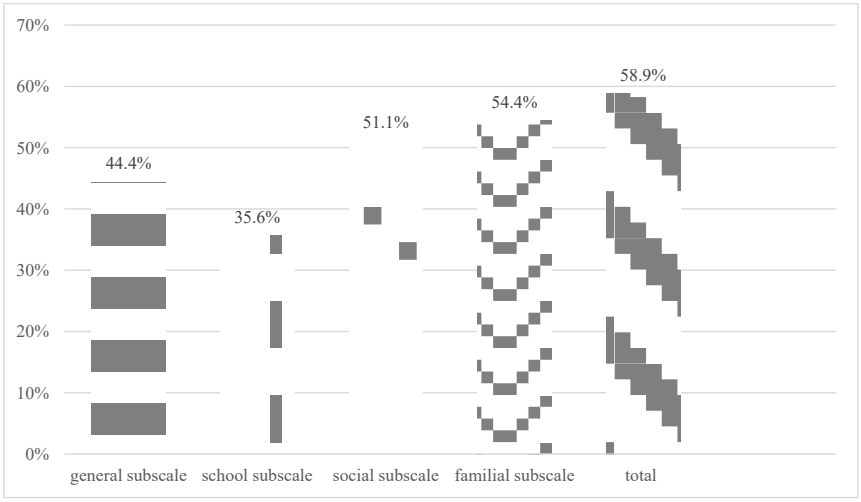

Figure 1: Distribution of adolescents having a high self-esteem according to the different subscales

Table 1: Distribution of mean scores of self-esteem according to the different subscales

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean± SD†
General self-esteem	4	24	16.66±3.96
School self-esteem	2	7	4.27±1.61
Social self-esteem	1	7	5.41±1.29
Familial self-esteem	1	8	4.71±1.64
Total self-esteem	15	49	34.62±7.14

†SD: standard deviation

Table 2: Total self-esteem variation according to socio-biographic factors

	Total SE†		p Value
	High	Low	
Sex			
Male	54.8%	45.2%	0.450
Female	62.5%	37.5%	
Family income			
Low to medium	15.4%	84.6%	<0.001
High	76.6%	23.4%	
Father's educational level			
Illiterate/primary school	15.4%	84.6%	0.001
Secondary school/university	66.2%	33.8%	
Mother's educational level			
Illiterate/primary school	0%	100%	<0.001
Secondary school/university	68.8%	31.2%	
Parenting style			
Democratic	69.2%	30.8%	0.110
Authoritarian	45.5%	54.5%	
Permissive	50%	50%	
Relationship with parents			
Harmonious	69%	31%	0.020
Conflictual	43.3%	56.7%	
Communication with parents			
Satisfactory	67.1%	32.9%	0.009
Almost non-existing	33.3%	66.7%	
Decision-making			
Yes	67.1%	32.9%	0.009
No	33.3%	66.7%	
Friendship network			
Good	65.2%	34.8%	0.100
Few or no friends	45.5%	54.5%	
Academic average (2017-2018)	14.83±1.62	12.36±3.91	0.001
Extracurricular activity			
Yes	73.2%	26.8%	0.010
No	46.9%	53.1%	

(51.1%) subscales. Furthermore, the mean score of social self-esteem was higher than the mean scores of both familial and social self-esteem subscales (5.41 *versus* 4.71 and *versus* 4.27, respectively).

As members of voluntary association, these adolescents were engaged in positive and caring social behaviors, thus, contributing to their own development and ensuring positive social relationships. The links established between adolescents through prosocial activities could enhance their active participation in the community and provide an incentive to collaborate with adults. These activities also offer the opportunity to gain direct experience working, to develop self-confidence and to promote personal and school perseverance. In addition to these overall findings, it appears that engaging in social action increases the chances of success, which could value the adolescent and strengthen his self-esteem.

On another note, the high self-esteem in the familial subscale of this study could be explained by the reasonably balanced family situations of these adolescents. In fact, most of them belonged to high-income families (76.6%), lived with well-educated parents (66.2% of fathers and 68.8% of mothers) and had a harmonious relationship within their families (69%). These factors could foster adolescents' self-esteem especially that the family environment is a major pillar on which self-esteem is built. It is worth mentioning that parents in Tunisia are generally over involved in adolescents 'lives and adolescents 'peer relationships. They supply their children with enough security, affection and attention, which are very important in the development of a child's abilities and perception.
In the school subscale, more than one third of respondents (35.6%) had high self-esteem. This would seem a reasonable result given the fact that 78.9% of them had an academic average equal to or greater than 13/20 in the 2017-2018 school year.

Moreover, previous research has shown the significant relationship between prosocial behavior, high self-esteem[12], academic success[13,14] and good relations with peers[15], which is consistent with the findings of the present study.

According to our study, there was no significant relationship between self-esteem and the sex of the adolescent. However, various studies undertaken on western samples had already provided evidence for self-esteem gender variation[16-18]. In these studies, self-esteem measurement considered the physical dimension, as physical self-esteem is particularly relevant during adolescence and differs considerably depending on the gender. In fact, physical self-esteem is the evaluation of oneself as a physical person, including attractiveness, health, and physical limitations and prowess[19]. In this way, the huge gender differences in many Western societies could be explained by the cultural emphasis on girls and women's physical appearance. Numerous studies have shown that girls' attitudes toward their appearance become more negative during adolescence[20]. This decline in girls' perceived physical attractiveness is supposed to have particularly negative effects on self-esteem when cultural pressures regarding women's physical appearance are high. Yet, both males and females who feel physically attractive tend to have higher self-esteem[21,22].

We have to point out that, along with the gender variation, interaction effects were found between ages on self-esteem[23]. In the 12 to 14 age group, girls have higher self-esteem than boys, while in the 17 to 19 age group, boys have higher self-esteem than girls[24].

Participants enjoying a high level of socio-economic development had significantly better self-esteem ($p<0.001$). In fact, social influences affecting youth are unavoidable, and self-esteem is widely subjected to these influences. It is possible to imagine that in our modern society, where social success is reflected in financial capacities as well as in self-perception by others, the socio-economic status can influence self-esteem.

Besides these structural factors, self-esteem also depends on relational factors in both familial and peer groups. In this respect, the present study showed that a high-conflict relationship with parents, adolescents' lack of involvement in decision making and lack of communication with parents were associated to low total self-esteem (respectively $p=0.02$; 0.009; 0.009). Research suggests that the quality of the parental relationship influences healthy development among children, including the development of their self-esteem[25]. According to many youth-development specialists, self-esteem may be derived to a significant extent from feelings of self-worth and personal satisfaction that stem from their experiences at school and mainly within their families[26]. In this way, and as suggested by numerous empirical studies, family open communication is positively related to self-esteem[27]. Moreover, the quality of the adolescent–parent relationship helps adolescents make decisions about their career choices by providing a secure base and by facilitating the risk-taking behavior associated with the decisional process. The adolescents' ability to make decisions strengthens their self-esteem, which in turn consolidates their ego-identity development[28]. In this regard, paternal involvement possibly increases the fulfillment and satisfaction among both parents, which may be beneficial for the parent-child relationship of both mother and father[29]. In fact, fathers play an active role in the child's identity construction, fostering the autonomy, independence and self-confidence they need for a balanced affective life. This might explain the significant relationship which has been found between the participants' total self-esteem and their fathers' educational level ($p=0.001$). Of equal importance was the mothers' educational level, the higher it was, the higher the adolescents' self-esteem was ($p<0.001$). Well-educated parents provide more support, more communication and more parent-child negotiation, therefore, enhancing the child's self-esteem.

Unlike the data in the literature, there was no significant relationship between self-esteem of the participants and the parenting style, as it was perceived by the participants ($p=0.11$). This may be attributed to the absence of an objective assessment based on a standardized psychometric scale. A Spanish study involving 1445 adolescents showed that on the different self-esteem criteria, children from indulgent homes obtained equal or higher scores on family and physical self-esteem than those from authoritative families; the lowest scores were detected in children from authoritarian and neglectful families[23]. The greatest family protection corresponded to parents with permissive and democratic socialization styles. The children of these styles were less vulnerable, obtaining higher scores on self-esteem.

According to our study, total self-esteem was higher in adolescents with good friendship networks; however, the relationship was not significant ($p=0.1$). This lack of correlation may be due to the multi-dimensionality of total self-esteem, comprising general and school subscales in addition to the social subscale. Different psychological theories postulate adolescents' self-esteem is particularly shaped by social feedback and the sense of being liked by others. In fact, during adolescence, not only peers relationships increase in importance, but also peers expectations, opinions, and actions become more important for adolescents self-images[30].

Besides, self-satisfaction was linked to school success, in our study. Participants with high self-esteem had significantly higher academic averages ($p=0.001$). In the same way, some studies evidenced that students with better educational performances showed higher levels of self-esteem[31]. Others found that self-esteem may relate to higher aspirations which may then connect to academic performance. Indeed, the relationship between self-

esteem and academic achievement may be positive but may also be affected by other factors such as one's perseverance and passion towards goals[32].

Finally, our results showed that practice of extracurricular activities was associated to high self-esteem (p=0.01). In half of the cases (50%), those activities consisted of sports. Individuals' sports participation is associated with their self-esteem[33]. For example, perceived physical competence and physical self-worth contribute to higher self-esteem in sport participants. Time spent in sporting activities gives opportunities to build sport competencies and, in turn, the self-concept of abilities. In addition, contrary to low sport self-concept, high sport self-concept in children leads to high self-esteem[34].

Conclusion

The present study evidenced relatively high rates of high self-esteem among adolescents with prosocial behavior in the city of Sfax (Tunisia). It also highlighted the role of structural factors such as family's income and interpersonal relationships in determining self-esteem in adolescence. This allows to affirm that the outlined difference in the self-esteem clearly pertains less to the prosocial behavior and to its specificities than to the adolescence commonly observed processes. Furthermore, our results emphasized the crucial role of academic success as a predictable indicator of high self-esteem. It has potential implications for educational programs targeted at adolescents' positive development. Consequently, reforms of the educational system should take into account the self-esteem dimension, not only by encouraging socialization and communication but also by fostering sports education. Parents and teachers should also encourage adolescents to engage in more frequent and higher quality prosocial behavior as one potential avenue of fostering self-esteem.

Despite the many contributions made by the current study, there are limitations that could be improved in future research. First, our study population consisted of 90 adolescents who were recruited in one city in Tunisia (Sfax); it was therefore not representative of the Tunisian adolescents. It would be interesting to broaden the sample to include Tunisian adolescents from other cities so that our findings could be more relevant. The second limitation is related to the reliance on correlational data. Thus, it is necessary to conduct further longitudinal research to examin the effects of prosocial behavior toward different targets on self-esteem during adolescence.

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