

Sense of Personal Agency of Adolescents: Socioecological Predictors and Gender Differences

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Introduction

Sense of Personal Agency (SPA)

Perception of capacity to optimize resources and overcome obstacles in order to achieve self-determined goals

A strong SPA will allow adolescents to **more easily resist and transform the constraints of Western societies** such as high unpredictability, shaping their own life course

Effective adaptation on adolescence

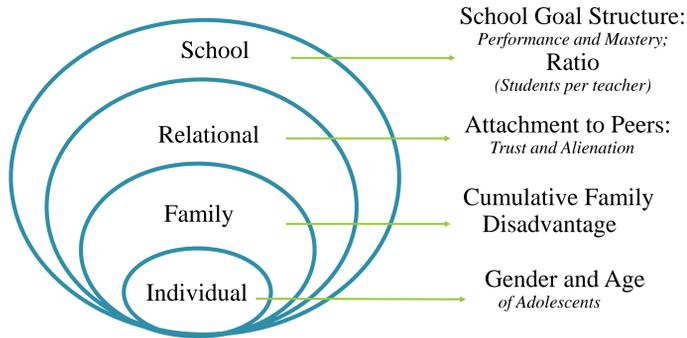
Mental health

Better academic results

Research Gaps:

No study has sought to identify gender differences in SPA determinants based on a socioecological approach to human agency

Socioecological Approach of Human Agency



Current study

Through a socioecological approach to development, we sought to analyze gender differences on predictors of adolescents' SPA.

Method

Participants

1189 adolescents (665 girls and 524 boys), aged from 14 to 18 years, of 18 high schools and their school heads

Measures

Adolescents' report

School heads' report

SPA	Setting goals (SG); Optimism (OPT); Decision making (DM); Self efficacy (SE) (Nunes et al., 2019)
Family Disadvantage	Low parental education; Unskilled parental occupations; Low family income (Johnson & Hitlin, 2017)
Attachment to Peers	IPPA: Trust; Alienation (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)

School Goal Structure	Mastery Goal Structure; Performance Goal Structure (Midgley et al., 2000)
Ratio	School characterization questionnaire

All measures had good psychometric properties. SPA and IPPA revealed metric invariance among gender.

Procedures

Data Analysis

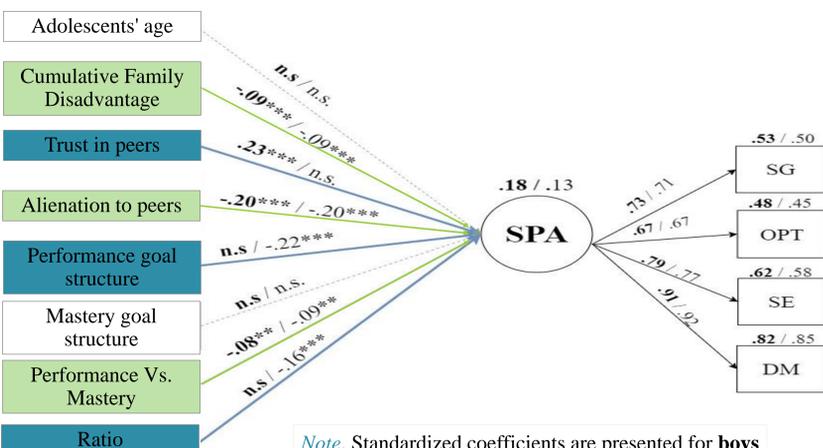
- Ethics Committee;
- Data protection officer;
- Ministry of Education;
- Parental informed consent and adolescent's assent.

- Analysis in R;
- ICC;
- Multigroup analysis by gender.

ICC values indicated that regression analyses were more suitable in our sample than multilevel analyses.

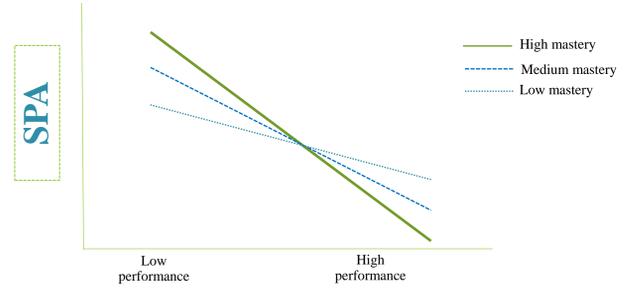
Results

Multigroup Analysis by Gender



Note. Standardized coefficients are presented for boys (in bold) before the slash and for girls after the slash.

Interaction of Performance and Mastery on SPA Independent of Gender



Young people who attend schools with lower levels of performance and higher levels of mastery reveal a stronger SPA than adolescents who attend schools with lower levels of performance and mastery simultaneously.

Discussion

For boys and girls

Although young people are not passive receivers of structural disadvantages, adolescents who come from **families with multiple disadvantages** tend to perceive themselves as lower capable to shape their life course

Relationships with peers characterized by **alienation** seem to undermine adolescents' SPA

Adolescents who perceive their peers as not available to help them in face of difficulties are likely to repress themselves and reveal lower SPA

Performance Vs Mastery

When school performance goals are reduced, mastery goals seem to contribute to a stronger adolescents' SPA.

In turn...

Schools highly focused on competition and performance seem to "suppress" the contribution of mastery on SPA.

For boys

Trustful peers' relationships seem to contribute to the perception of stronger SPA

A peer who validates, encourages, and supports adolescents' efforts likely serves as a relational resource to promote boys' confidence, but not girls, in their own abilities

For girls

Performance Goal Structure

Girls who attend schools that transmits the message that the purpose of school work is to demonstrate competence seem to be "repressed" by the schools' goals and reveal a lower SPA

Possible explanation
Gender inequalities

Girls who feel that schools do not value their efforts and instead "push" them to compete with others tend to understand themselves as lower capable to shape their life course

Ratio

Girls, more than boys, seem to need a school context with fewer students per teacher to understand themselves as authors of their life course.

Boys' SPA seems to be more permeable to relational context variables while girls' SPA seems to be more permeable to the school context variables.

Gender inequalities

Limitations | Future Studies

Modest amount of interindividual variation of SPA | Cross-sectional design | Self-report measures | Reduced number of schools

Taking into account the changes that adolescents experience in contexts includes in our model, it would be valuable to analyze gender differences on socioecological predictors on youth' SPA across adolescence.

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