Perceptions of Movement Competence in Children and Adolescents From Different Cultures and Countries: A Commentary

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I was pleased to have the opportunity to read the articles in this special issue and to write a commentary regarding them. My scholarly background is located within the social psychology of physical activity. In particular, my research work has primarily been centered around the study of social agents (parents, teachers, coaches, program directors) and their effect on the physical self-perceptions of children, adolescents, and young adults. Thus, I accepted the invitation to serve as commentator for this special issue as I was sure that the articles as a group would significantly advance the research in the area. Certainly, I have not been disappointed in that expectation.

The relevance of this special issue to the research base in the broader field of kinesiology was emphasized by all of the authors in this group of papers who noted in their literature reviews that both actual and perceived movement competence are related to (even predictive of) children’s motivation and behavior with regard to physical activity, health-related fitness status, risk for obesity, as well as their psychosocial health and well-being. Much of this cited research is based on cross-sectional research work, but there are also longitudinal studies that have provided support for the value of these two constructs in enhancing children’s health and well-being (see, for example, Barnett, Morgan, van Beurden, & Beard, 2008).

Given the demonstrated importance of both actual and perceived motor competence to positive outcomes in children, the papers published in this special issue are particularly of value to the research literature and to the field. In the next section of this commentary, I highlight major contributions that this set of papers provides.

Contributions to Research Field and Knowledge Base

Measurement of Perceived Motor Competence

To begin with, this special issue should be considered a primary asset to the field in terms of its focus on the development and assessment of measurement tools that can assist current and future researchers in examining the links between actual and
perceived motor competence, as well as their separate or combined impact on such positive outcomes as moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) levels, fitness-related health, and overall self-esteem or self-worth. In particular, instruments such as the Perceived Movement Skill Competence for Young Children (PMSC) scales (Barnett, Ridgers, Zask, & Salmon, 2015; Barnett et al., 2016) are especially valuable as they link perceived and actual constructs to the same or similar skills (locomotor, object control, and active play). In previous years, researchers from the social psychology of sport and physical activity area (such as myself), who were primarily interested in studying perceived physical competence in children, were generally limited to an overall assessment of children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of physical competence as measured through more general scales such as the Physical Self-Perception Profile (PSPP) (Fox, 1990; Fox & Corbin, 1989), the corresponding Children and Youth Physical Self-Perception Profile (CY-PSPPP) (Eklund, Whitehead, & Welk, 1997), and the Physical Self-Description Questionnaire (Marsh, Richards, Johnson, Roche, & Tremayne, 1994). Although these self-report questionnaires do provide valid and reliable measures of children’s, adolescents’, and adults’ perceptions of competence in the physical and sport domains, they are limited to a focus on perceived competence as defined in a broader way (e.g., perceived levels of sport competence, physical strength, physical conditioning, body fat, coordination, etc.). Thus, the potential link between actual and perceived measures of individuals’ movement competence was difficult to assess because the two constructs (actual and perceived competence) were not always (or were seldom) measured by using the same skills or activities.

Another important point to make is that the measurement tools tested across many articles in this set convey a developmentally based approach in that the research teams either focused on motor skills as they are acquired and exhibited during the early to middle childhood years or those that are relevant to the late childhood and adolescent years. Correspondingly, developmentally specific measurement formats were used across studies. For younger children (preschool through early childhood years), there is the Pictorial Scale of the PMSC (Barnet et al., 2015; Barnett et al., 2016) that was used by several sets of researchers (e.g., Diao et al.; Estevan et al.; Ruri, et al.; Valentini et al.; Venetsanou et al.). For children and adolescents from middle childhood through late childhood and into adolescence years, a questionnaire format was developed, used, and tested by some authors (e.g., Chan et al.; Dreiskaemper et al.; O’Brien et al.; Timler et al.).

With an eye toward a more digitized future, Barnett and Makin (this issue) tested the value of an app to assess young children’s perceptions of movement competence and also pointed to research (Robinson & Palmer, 2017) examining the applicability of a digital-based scale to assess perceived movement competence. The fact that all of these instruments (pictorial scales, self-report questionnaires, apps, digital-based scale) assess participants’ perceptions of their fundamental motor competence (locomotor and object control, as well as some additional components such as active play skills, daily living, or functional skill activities), links them directly to the actual skills that are characteristic of motor competence development (primarily measured in this set of studies by various forms of the Test of Gross Motor Development (second edition [TGMD-2] and third edition [TGMD-3]) (Ulrich, 2000, Ulrich, 2016). In addition, such consistency across developmental ages/stages in the assessment tools that have been