

# How social desirability moderates the sex differences in physical aggression throughout the life span

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## INTRODUCTION

Several studies have shown that personality changes across the life course (e.g., McCrae, Martin, & Costa, 2005; Soto, John, Gosling & Potter, 2011). Although these changes have been interpreted in terms of better emotional regulation and increased maturity, Soubelet & Salthouse (2011) recently proposed that they may reflect the effects of age-related changes in social desirability (SD) on certain personality dimensions, because they rely on self-reported data. The effects of age-related changes in social desirability have often been reported and it seems that there is a tendency among elderly people to present themselves favourably, in such a way that they have higher scores on SD than young and middle-aged adults (Dijkstra, Smit, & Comijs, 2001; Ray, 1988; Stöber, 2001).

Sexual selection theory proposes that sex differences in physical aggression are due to greater competition for reproduction in males

than in females, which leads males to use more risky strategies. This difference seems to peak around 20-30 years old, which is consistent with this theory. As a consequence of this theory, sex differences should decrease with age and reach a minimum in the elderly. Nevertheless, only one study has focused on sex differences in aggression in the elderly (Morales-Vives & Vigil-Colet 2010). It found that although sex differences were present in physical aggression, the effect size was small and lower than the effect sizes obtained in younger samples.

Taking into account that recent studies have found that aggression measures are highly affected by social desirability, of which elderly samples (especially women) have high levels, the present study analyses sex differences in physical aggression using a new test which has been developed with a method that provides measures free of social desirability.

## METHOD

### Participants

This study involved the participation of 1600 participants (68% women and 32% men) aged between 14 and 97 years old ( $M = 32.5$ ;  $S.D. = 22.2$ ).

### Measures

- The *Indirect-Direct Aggression Questionnaire (I-DAQ)*, Ruiz-Pamies et al., 2012): it has 23 content items and the 4 markers of SD proposed by Ferrando et al. (2009), and negatively keyed items for controlling acquiescence on each scale.
- The *Mini Examen Cognoscitivo (MEC)*, Lobo et al; 1999) is an Spanish adaptation of the Mini-Mental Status Examination (*MMSE*, Folstein et al., 1975). This questionnaire is a quick test for screening cognitive function deficits in the elderly. This test was used with those participants who were more than 60 years old.

### Procedure

Various strategies were used to collect the sample:

- Groups of adolescents in their classroom.
- Students at university in their classrooms.
- Workers of different companies.
- Participants during academic university activities for graduates/adults.
- Elderly people in their nursing homes and specially-designed university courses.

## RESULTS

Figure 1. Acquiescence and age

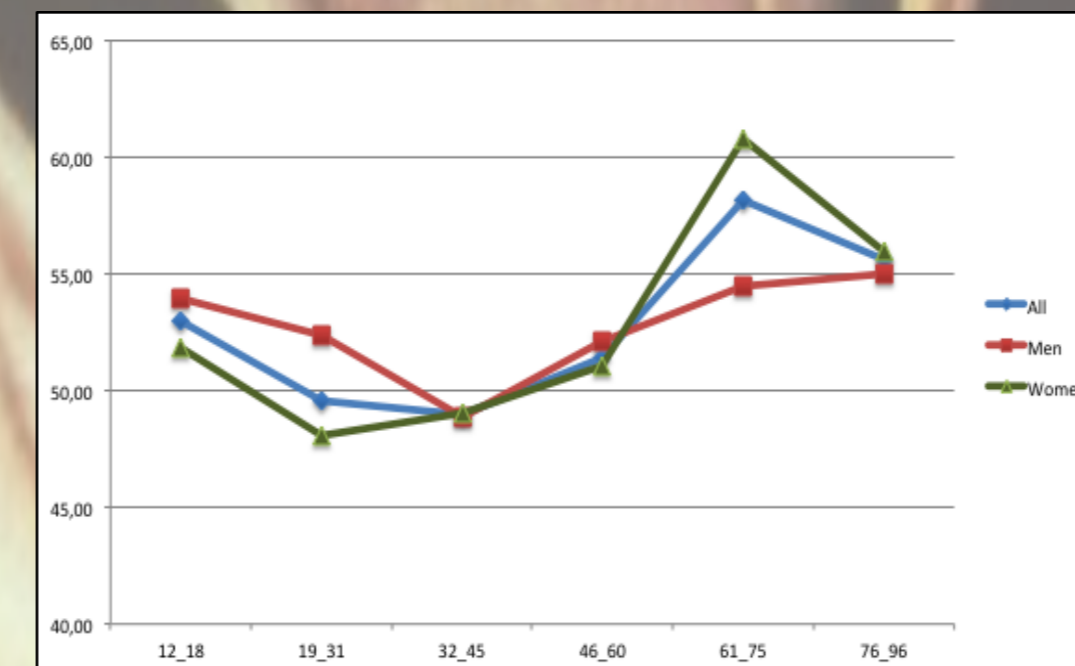


Figure 2. Social desirability and age

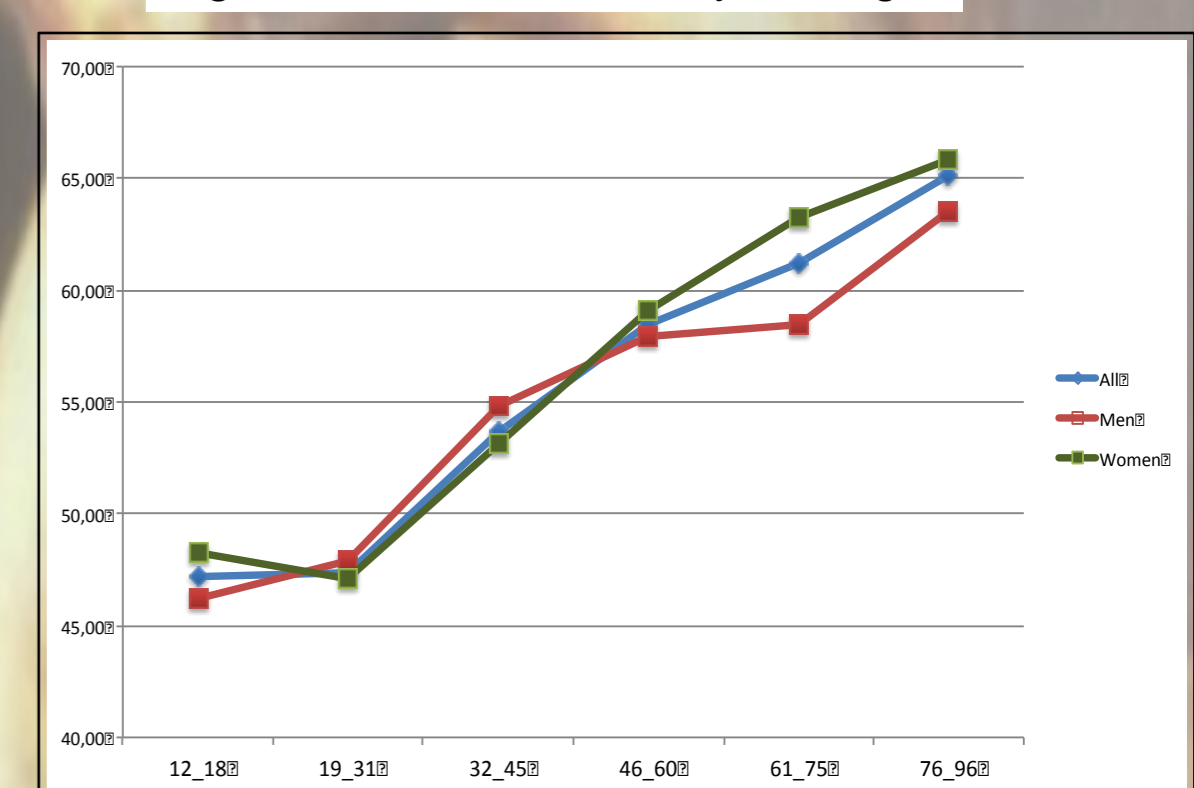


Figure 4. Physical aggression and age

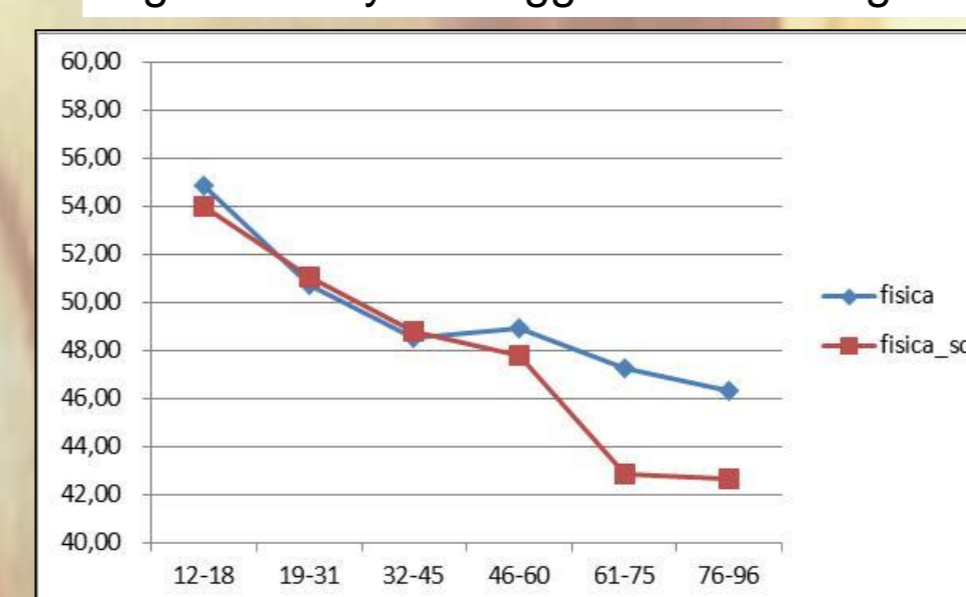


Figure 5. Physical aggression (men and women)

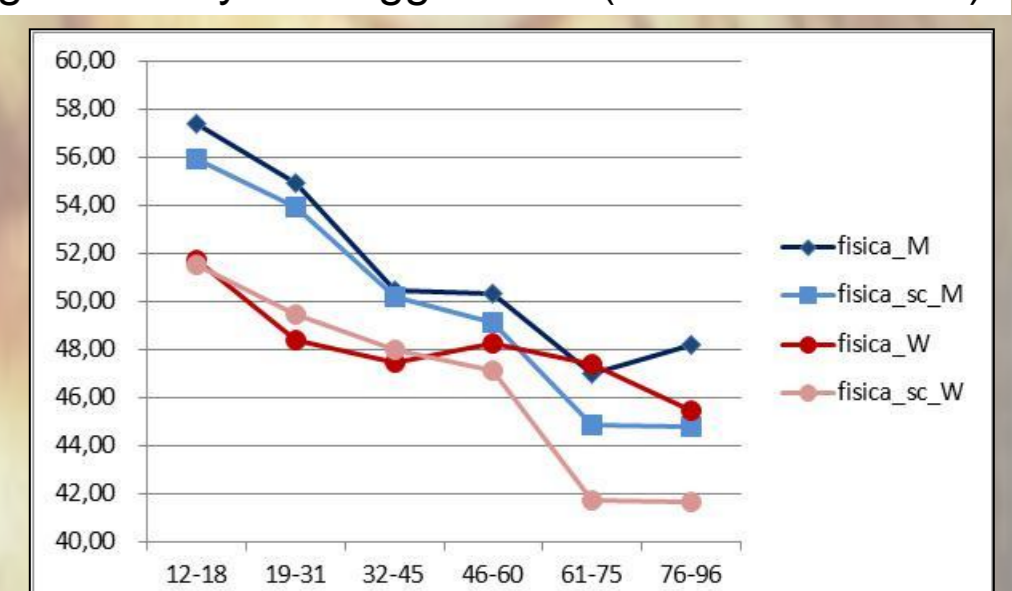


Figure 3. Verbal aggression and age

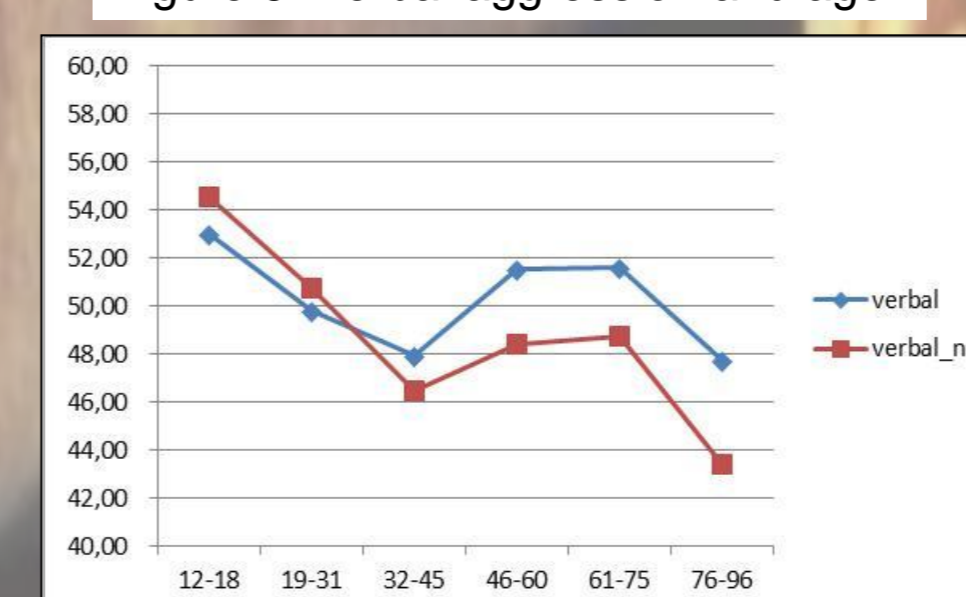


Figure 6. Indirect aggression and age

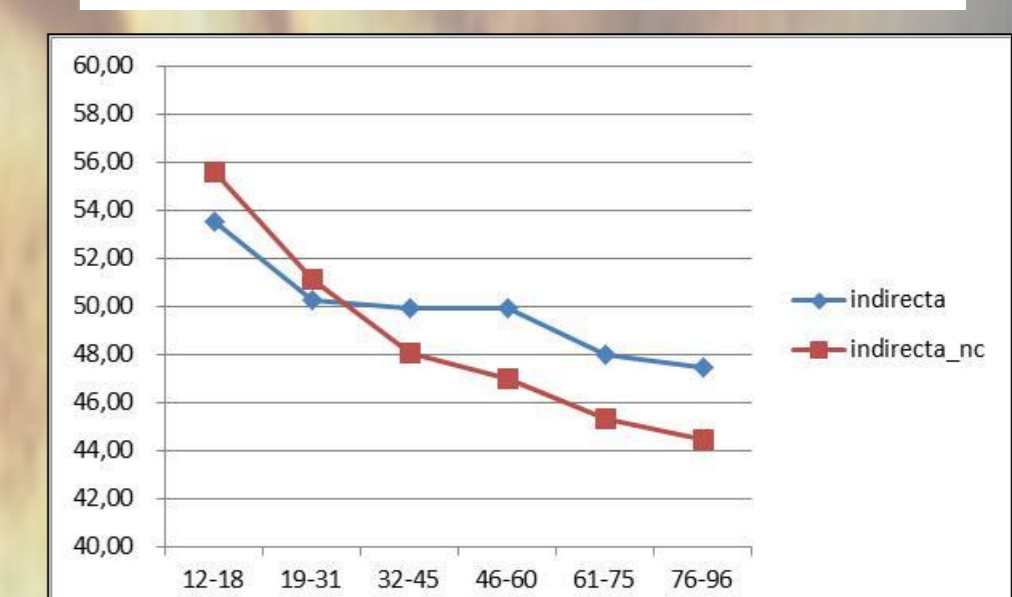


Table 1. Correlations with age

	Physical	Verbal	Indirect	Overall
Control	-,189	-,082	-,151	-,199
Without Control	-,276	-,249	-,270	-,342

## DISCUSSION

1

The results showed that when social desirability is controlled, the expected high sex differences in physical aggression are found in adolescence and the first years of adulthood, while these differences are not found or are almost negligible in late adulthood and old age.

2

The results seem to show that when social desirability is controlled sex differences in physical aggression throughout the life span fit with sexual selection theory.

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