RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OBJECTIVE FITNESS EVALUATION AND PERCEPTION OF HEALTH AND FITNESS IN THE PORTUGUESE MILITARY ACADEMY STUDENTS

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The purposes of this study were (a) to characterize perceptions of health and fitness in students who are attending the Portuguese Military Academy, and (b) to study how these perceptions are related to an objective fitness evaluation. The sample consisted of 371 students, 327 boys and 44 girls, ranging from 18 to 25 years old, corresponding to the total number of students attending the Academy. The study developed in two steps. First, a questionnaire from an extensive European comparative study (1), translated into Portuguese was used. Secondly, 30 students representing three groups of fitness perception (high, medium and low fitness perception) identified by the cluster analysis were submitted to a battery of fitness tests. BMI, body fat, VO2 max, muscular strength and flexibility data were collected. A cluster analysis was used for data processing.

When comparing the group with both higher health and fitness perceptions (10.2% of the sample) with the group of students with lower perceptions (35.7%), the group with higher perceptions is characterized favourably in terms of determinants of physical activities and leisure activities in items such as: I want to stay fit, I like sport competition, I like to learn new abilities working hard, I practice more than 7 hours per week, 2 or 3 times a week. 37 boys and one girl constitute this group, showing higher health and fitness perceptions. As for the group of lower health and fitness perceptions, regarding the practice of physical and leisure activities, these students have stated I do not practice any physical activity or I practice less than an hour per week and I do not attend sport events. This group was mainly constituted by first grade 18 years old students, these including 32 girls of the whole sample. When comparing the two groups of students representing the higher and lower perception groups, according to their objective fitness evaluation, the students from the higher health and fitness perceptions group show higher objective fitness, showing lower BMI and less percentage of body fat. These students also present higher VO2 max, strength and flexibility than their colleagues of the lower health and fitness perception group.

The main conclusions are the following: (1.) As expected, the levels and patterns of physical activity are particularly high among these students; (2.) First grade, 18 years old and female students are the least physically active one; (3.) Apparently there is an extrinsic motivation related with the ethos environment, which helps to increase the levels of physical activity during the 5 years of the course; (4.) Students with higher health and fitness perceptions are more active; (5.) The results obtained with the objective fitness evaluation show a positive relationship not only with the health and fitness perceptions of the groups but also with the characteristics of their lifestyle; the higher associations were found in VO2 max and flexibility.


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