

## **Le harcèlement sexuel par des pairs à l'adolescence : le rôle de l'appartenance sexuelle**

**V. Susan Dahinten**

L'auteure décrit les expériences de harcèlement sexuel vécues par 565 étudiants et étudiantes de neuvième à onzième année et se penche sur l'influence qu'exerce la construction sociale liée à l'appartenance sexuelle sur ces expériences. L'échantillonnage est constitué d'étudiants et d'étudiantes de 12 écoles situées dans deux provinces canadiennes. L'étude s'appuie sur un modèle faisant usage de sondages corrélationnels axés sur la rétrospective et des questionnaires d'auto-évaluation ont été distribués en classe. Selon les résultats, le harcèlement sexuel est prépondérant chez les adolescents et les adolescentes mais il est particulièrement problématique chez les filles en raison de la différence qualitative du harcèlement qu'elles vivent. Les filles ainsi que les garçons témoignent que le harcèlement sexuel est, en général, plus perturbateur que ne le sont des avances sexuelles non désirées. Les filles ont recours à un plus grand éventail de stratégies d'adaptation que les garçons. Toutefois, les stratégies d'adaptation passives étaient prédominantes chez les deux sexes. L'auteure émet des recommandations relativement aux programmes de santé en milieu scolaire et discute du rôle de l'infirmière dans les écoles.

Mots clés : adolescence, harcèlement sexuel, pairs agresseurs, appartenance sexuelle

# **Peer Sexual Harassment in Adolescence: The Function of Gender**

**V. Susan Dahinten**

The author describes the sexual harassment experiences of 565 male and female students in Grades 9 through 11 and discusses the influence of the social construction of gender on those experiences. The sample was drawn from 12 schools in 2 Canadian provinces. The study employed a retrospective correlational survey design, using self-report questionnaires administered in class. The results indicate that sexual harassment is pervasive among both male and female adolescents but is particularly problematic for girls due to their qualitatively different harassment experiences. Both girls and boys reported gender harassment to be, in general, more upsetting than unwanted sexual advances. Girls employed a greater variety of coping strategies than boys; however, for both sexes passive coping strategies were predominant. The author offers recommendations related to school health programming and discusses the role of the school nurse.

Keywords: adolescence, sexual harassment, peer perpetrators, gender

During the last decade there has been increasing research interest in the sexual harassment experiences of adolescents and the health effects of sexual harassment. The now classic Hostile Hallways study commissioned by the American Association of University Women [AAUW] Educational Foundation (1993) has served as a prototype for a number of other studies (e.g., Fineran & Bennett, 1999; Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation [OSSTF], 1995; Trigg & Wittenstrom, 1996) and the evidence has converged to suggest that the majority of male and female high-school students, in almost equal proportions, have experienced some sexual harassment while at school. There is also some evidence that girls are targeted more frequently than boys and that they are more distressed by their experiences, but there has been little investigation into the quality of adolescent sexual harassment experiences and their relationship to gender. Moreover, published research on the sexual harassment of Canadian children and adolescents is limited to a survey of middle-school students by McMaster, Connolly, Peplar, and Craig (2002) and qualitative studies by Larkin (1994) and Berman, McKenna, Arnold, Taylor, and MacQuarrie (2000). The purpose of this study was to explore gender differences in the experience and appraisal of sexual harassment

among high-school students and to describe the students' ways of responding to the harassment.

## **Background**

### ***Prevalence of Sexual Harassment***

Research findings indicate that most high-school students have experienced some sexual harassment from their peers. Studies that have asked about the entire school year (Fineran & Bennett, 1999; OSSTE, 1995; Stein, Marshall, & Tropp, 1993) or the student's entire school life (AAUW, 1993; Trigg & Wittenstrom, 1996) have found prevalence rates ranging from 83% to 92% among girls and from 50% to 79% among boys, but with far more girls than boys (31% vs. 18%) reporting that they had been harassed "often" (AAUW). Despite the evidence that sexual harassment occurs among children in elementary and middle school (Berman et al., 2000; McMaster et al., 2002; Murnen & Smolak, 2000), and suggestions that university students experience even higher rates of harassment than high-school students (Bogart, Simmons, Stein, & Tomaszewski, 1992), there has been little investigation of developmental trends in sexual harassment.

### ***Appraisal of Sexual Harassment***

Although there is evidence that adolescents sometimes disregard peer sexual harassment as teasing that should not be taken too seriously (e.g., Berman et al., 2000; Larkin, 1994; McBride, 1998), there is also evidence suggesting that students do experience emotional and behavioural sequelae as a result of the harassment, albeit with significant gender differences. In the AAUW (1993) study, a much higher percentage of girls than boys reported feeling upset and fearful as a consequence of their harassment experiences. Similar gender differences in appraisal have been found in other studies with elementary- and high-school students (e.g., Fineran & Bennett, 1999; Murnen & Smolak, 2000; Trigg & Wittenstrom, 1996), but Fineran and Bennett are the only researchers to have measured the adolescent's appraisal of the *various* sexual harassment behaviours experienced. The AAUW survey included one item asking how upset the student was immediately after being harassed, but this global appraisal measure referred to any and all forms of sexual harassment — from being told sexual jokes to being forced into sexual activity. The AAUW survey also asked for an appraisal of the various sexual harassment behaviours, but this was an "anticipatory appraisal" pertaining to a hypothetical situation. Thus, our knowledge related to the appraisal of sexual harassment in adolescence, in its various forms and contexts, is limited.

### ***Coping with Sexual Harassment***

Researchers have sought to develop valid and reliable means of assessing the coping strategies of women who have experienced sexual harassment (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Magley, 1999). Far less work has been done with respect to adolescents' ways of coping. The AAUW (1993) study inquired about changes in the student's behaviour as a result of the harassment. Some of the resultant items could be considered coping strategies. However, none of the surveys of adolescents cited above included an actual "coping" scale. In a secondary analysis of AAUW data, Lee, Croninger, Linn, and Chen (1996) categorized some of the ensuing behaviours as educational outcomes (e.g., dropping out of a course), whereas Hand and Sanchez (2000) categorized them as behavioural outcomes (e.g., giving up a particular activity) or as outcomes that might more appropriately be considered somatic or emotional (e.g., loss of appetite).

### ***Theoretical Framework***

This investigation was part of a larger study of the relationships between sexual harassment and health outcomes among adolescents (Dahinten, 2001). The conceptual framework for the larger study was derived from a transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) which postulates that adaptational outcomes are related to people's experience and appraisal of environmental stressors, mediated by their coping responses. The present study was also informed by a conceptualization of gender as culturally imposed expectations regarding appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours (Koss et al., 1994). This gender lens suggests that the appraisal of sexual harassment experiences (i.e., the interpretation and reporting of one's feelings) and means of coping may be influenced by socially prescribed gender roles; thus sexual harassment may both emerge from and be reinforced by notions of gender (Hotelling & Zuber, 1997; Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliever, & Kilmartin, 2001).

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Data were obtained from 217 male and 348 female English-speaking students in Grades 9 through 11 at 12 public high schools in Canada, eight in the province of British Columbia ( $n = 319$ ; 56%) and four in the province of New Brunswick ( $n = 246$ ; 44%). Although both the students and the schools were recruited as convenience samples, diversity was sought by sampling from five school districts, by targeting both urban and small-town schools, and by situating the study within classes that drew from the school population as a whole (i.e., mandatory life skills

classes). The five school districts varied in their level of ethnic diversity; however, four of the 12 schools were the only school in the community, thus capturing the full diversity of that community. The schools ranged in size from 500 to 3,000 students (approximately).

The study was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia; written consent was also obtained from the appropriate school principal or school district superintendent prior to any recruitment activity. One week prior to data collection, the researcher visited each participating class to describe the study and distribute recruitment packages. Written parental consent was required; the students were advised that their consent was implied if they chose to complete the questionnaire on the day of the study.

Students in Grades 9, 10, and 11 accounted for 36%, 36%, and 28%, respectively, of the sample, with no significant difference in gender by grade,  $\chi^2(2, N = 565) = 3.30, p = .19$ . The mean participation rate per class was 72%. Most of the participants were Canadian-born (90%). They described their ethnic heritage as White/Caucasian (86%), Asian (7%), First Nations (3%), and Other (4%).

### **Data Collection**

The study employed a retrospective correlational survey design using a self-report questionnaire administered in class. The questionnaire consisted of 11 sets of questions related to sexual harassment victimization, coping with sexual harassment, other school-based microstressors, various health outcomes, and social desirability. Only the instruments related to sexual harassment and coping are described below.<sup>1</sup> It took most students 25 to 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The students then participated in a debriefing session at which they were invited to make comments or ask questions about the topic of sexual harassment and were provided with written information about peer harassment and available resources.

**Adolescent Sexual Harassment (ASH) scale.** Peer sexual harassment was measured using the 19-item Adolescent Sexual Harassment scale developed by White (1997) as a revision of the 14-item AAUW (1993) scale. The ASH is intended to sample more broadly from the domain of gender harassment. Gender harassment pertains to negative and degrading comments or actions related to a person's gender or gender-related attributes that are sex-related but not specifically sexual in nature (Koss et al., 1994). For example, one gender harassment item that was added in the ASH is "made negative comments about your body...suggesting that you don't look feminine/masculine enough." In the present study, prin-

---

<sup>1</sup> Details on the others may be obtained from the author.

principal components analysis with oblique rotation yielded an almost identical two-factor solution to that found by White: Gender Harassment and Sexual Advances/Imposition, which explained 46% and 43% of the variance in responses by girls and boys, respectively. There was a moderate correlation between the two components (.38 for girls and .22 for boys) and a Cronbach's alpha value of .86 for girls and .81 for boys, indicating good internal consistency.

The ASH asks how frequently the respondent has been the target of certain unwanted behaviours by peers during the school year using a 6-point response scale (0 = *never*; 5 = *daily or almost daily*). In the present study, the ASH items and response scale were used intact but the recall period was limited to 2 months. Two sets of questions were added in order to (a) identify the gender of the perpetrators as mostly girls, mostly boys, or both girls and boys; and (b) investigate the target's cognitive appraisal of the event. For each harassment behaviour the appraisal component asked the respondent, *If this has happened to you, how stressful or how upsetting was this for you?* using a 5-point response scale (0 = *not upsetting*; 4 = *very upsetting*). The appraisal component of the ASH-R was derived from other adolescent stress scales that assess the severity of the stressor or the desirability of the event (e.g., Compas, Davis, Forsythe, & Wagner, 1987).

***Coping with Harassment Questionnaire – Revised (CHQ-R).*** Cognitive and behavioural responses to sexual harassment were assessed using a shortened form of the 50-item Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (Fitzgerald, 1996; Fitzgerald et al., 1988) developed for use with an adult population. Eleven items were selected from the CHQ, drawing from each of the 10 coping strategies to reflect both internal (5 items) and external (6 items) responses. Shortened formats of 10, 11, and 21 items have been used by other harassment researchers (e.g., Magley & Fitzgerald, 1996; Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997). The response format for this scale was: 0 = *never*, 1 = *sometimes*, 2 = *half the time*, 3 = *frequently*, and 4 = *all or almost all the time*. The 11-item scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha level of .64 for girls and .76 for boys. The psychometric properties of this scale and adolescents' ways of coping with sexual harassment are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Dahinten, 2002).

### ***Data Analysis***

The analyses were primarily descriptive in nature. Responses to questions about the frequency of harassment and use of coping responses were dichotomized into ever/never experienced and ever/never used, and then analyzed by gender with chi-square statistics using the Yates continuity correction factor. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to examine the relationships between mean scores on the

**Table 1 Sexual Harassment Experiences in Past 2 Months**

Sexual Harassment Item	% Ever Harassed		$\chi^2$
	Girls n = 348	Boys n = 217	
Spread sexual rumors or wrote sexual graffiti about you on bathroom walls or hallways etc.	22.7	14.3	5.98*
Called you lesbian (gay) or something similar	28.8	39.6	7.06**
Made negative comments about your body suggesting that you don't look feminine (masculine) enough	36.1	43.3	2.84
Made fun or you or called you names for having too much (not enough) sexual experience	16.7	8.8	7.00**
Teased you about having PMS or your period (your hormones, e.g., your testosterone level)	44.8	6.9	90.08***
Called you a name like "butch" etc. (girl, vimp, etc.) suggesting that you are not feminine (masculine) enough	22.0	36.3	13.49***
Put down females (males) in general	64.9	42.6	27.07***
Gave you an unwelcome or crude compliment about your body or parts of your body	39.8	19.4	25.29***
Showed you a sexual cartoon or picture or told you a sexual joke that you didn't want to see or hear	33.7	15.7	22.19***
Flashed or "mooned" you	30.8	27.8	0.60
Made a sexual gesture or started at your body in a sexual way	62.6	40.6	26.27***
Followed you around or pestered you for a date after you said you weren't interested	30.5	19.8	7.91**
Yelled something sexual or whistled or howled at you when you walked by	63.4	31.8	53.37***
Touched, grabbed, or pinched you in a sexual way	45.8	38.2	3.13
Stood too close or brushed up against you in a sexual way	40.1	35.0	1.44
Pulled at your clothing in a sexual way or pulled your clothing down or off	18.3	18.9	0.04
Blocked your way or cornered you in a sexual way	18.0	10.6	5.70*
Kissed or hugged you when you didn't want them to	24.9	19.8	1.92
Forced you to do something sexual other than kissing/hugging	10.1	6.5	2.28

Note: \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

sexual harassment scale and subscales and grade and gender. Gender differences in appraisal were examined through *t* tests using the Bonferroni correction factor.

## **Results**

### ***Sexual Harassment Prevalence Rates***

The majority of students in the sample (93%) reported experiencing at least one form of sexual harassment during the preceding 2 months, with higher rates being reported by girls (95%) than boys (89%):  $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 565) = 6.63, p < .05$ . There were no statistically significant differences in the prevalence rates by province:  $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 565) = 1.28, p = .26$ . A variety of harassment behaviours had been experienced by both male and female students, and the majority of students had experienced multiple forms of harassment. For example, 64% of the girls and 45% of the boys had been the target of five or more forms of harassment, with one in every four girls experiencing 10 or more forms. Forms of both gender harassment and sexual advances were included among the most common behaviours, with approximately two thirds of the girls reporting that they had been the target of sexual yells, whistles, or howls; sexual gestures or stares; and derogatory comments about females (Table 1). In contrast, no single behaviour was reported by more than half of the boys. Ten of the 19 harassment behaviours had been experienced by more girls than boys; however, higher proportions of boys than girls reported being targeted for derogatory remarks questioning their gender (e.g., being called *gay* or being called *a name like girl, wimp, etc.*, suggesting inadequate masculinity).

Total frequency scores were computed for the two subscales (Gender Harassment and Sexual Advances/Imposition) and the total scale (Table 2), and MANOVA was used to examine differences by gender and grade. A significant group difference for grade was found for the Gender Harassment subscale,  $F(2, 557) = 6.578, p < .01$ , and was reflected in the total Sexual Harassment scores,  $F(2, 557) = 3.183, p < .05$ . Dunnett T3 post-hoc comparisons (utilized because the test of homogeneity of variances was not supported) indicated that Grade 9 students experienced higher levels of gender harassment than Grade 10 students ( $p < .001$ ). Girls were the target of both forms of sexual harassment significantly more often than boys (gender harassment,  $F[1, 558] = 10.829, p < .01$ ; sexual advances,  $F[1, 558] = 4.074, p < .05$ ), but the interaction term (gender-by-grade) was not found to be significant for any of the measures.

As a group, girls were targeted for sexual harassment more often than boys, and with a greater variety of harassment behaviours. The students did not, however, necessarily identify and label themselves as having been



Scale / Subscale	Girls (n = 348)		Boys (n = 217)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Gender Harassment Subscale</b>				
Grade 9	5.84	(5.7)	3.99	(3.9)
Grade 10	3.85	(4.3)	2.82	(3.0)
Grade 11	4.27	(5.3)	3.33	(3.8)
<b>Sexual Advances/ Imposition Subscale</b>				
Grade 9	5.52	(5.6)	5.32	(7.8)
Grade 10	5.93	(6.3)	3.76	(5.1)
Grade 11	5.27	(6.6)	4.33	(5.7)
<b>Total Sexual Harassment Scale</b>				
Grade 9	11.37	(9.5)	9.31	(9.0)
Grade 10	9.78	(9.5)	6.55	(6.8)
Grade 11	9.54	(9.3)	7.85	(8.0)
<i>Note:</i> Response scale = 0–5. Total range of scores: Gender Harassment = 0–35, Sexual Advances/Imposition = 0–45, Total Sexual Harassment Scale = 0–80.				

sexually harassed. Among those who reported experiencing at least one of the 19 harassment behaviours, only 35% of the girls and 14% of the boys responded affirmatively to a global item in the survey that asked respondents to report whether or not they had been “sexually harassed” during the preceding 2 months. This suggests that students’ perceptions and/or reporting of their peers’ behaviours seriously underestimates the prevalence of sexual harassment according to the definitions commonly used by harassment researchers.

### ***Gender Analysis of the Target-Perpetrator Dyad***

As expected, cross-gender harassment accounted for almost all of the behaviours in the Sexual Advances/Imposition subscale. The pattern for Gender Harassment, however, varied according to the gender of the target. For the majority of the gender harassment items, approximately half of the female respondents reported that the behaviours were perpetrated primarily by boys, with a third reporting that they were perpetrated by both boys and girls. In contrast, a large majority of the male targets reported same-gender harassment. Thus, it seems that boys are

responsible for most of the gender harassment experienced by their male and female peers, whereas both boys and girls are involved in harassment that takes the form of cross-gender sexual advances. As expected, the only gender harassment item that was primarily a cross-gender behaviour was the item on “gender put-downs.”

### ***Appraisal***

The data on appraisal support the notion that females are more negatively affected by harassment than are males (Table 3). Multiple *t* tests using a Bonferroni correction factor indicated that 12 of the harassment behaviours were appraised as significantly more upsetting for girls than boys. These analyses include only those students who actually experienced the harassment. Thus, even though the sexual harassment scale asks about behaviours that occurred when the respondent *did not want them to*, many more of the boys who acknowledged being a target reported that the behaviour was not upsetting or only slightly upsetting to them. The two behaviours reported as the most upsetting for boys were being the target of sexual rumours or graffiti ( $M = 1.13, SD = 1.41$ ) and being followed or pestered for a date ( $M = 0.95, SD = 1.28$ ). The girls were also upset by sexual rumours, giving this behaviour the second-highest score ( $M = 2.21, SD = 1.44$ ). As expected, being *forced to do something sexual other than kissing or hugging* was reported as the most upsetting experience among girls ( $M = 2.94, SD = 1.47$ ). It is noteworthy that, except for the last harassment item, which clearly crosses the line into sexual assault, gender harassment behaviours were generally considered to be more upsetting, among both girls and boys, than sexual advances or sexual imposition.

### ***Coping Responses to Peer Sexual Harassment***

Both female and male students reported multiple forms of coping, although girls reported using a greater variety of responses. Half of the female respondents (51%) and a third of the male respondents (32%) reported using five or more coping strategies in response to the harassment behaviours of their peers. *Denial* was the most prevalent response among both girls (64%) and boys (57%). The other responses most commonly reported by girls were *seeking social support* (62%), *detachment* (58%), *endurance* (55%), *avoidance* (49%), and *confrontation* (46%). These five coping responses were more prevalent among girls ( $p < .05$ ) than boys. *Relabelling* was the second most common response among boys and the only coping strategy reported by more boys than girls, although the difference did not reach statistical significance ( $p = .17$ ). *Informal and formal complaints* was the least common response, with no statistically significant differences by gender. Among the girls who reported being sexually

**Table 3 Mean Ratings of Appraisal of Sexual Harassment Experiences Among Targeted Students**

Sexual Harrassment Item	Girls				Boys				t test
	n	M	SD	95% CI	n	M	SD	95% CI	
Sexual rumors or sexual graffiti	78	2.21	(1.4)	1.88 – 2.53	31	1.13	(1.4)	0.61 – 1.65	3.55**
Called lesbian (gay)	100	1.32	(1.5)	1.02 – 1.62	83	0.78	(1.2)	0.51 – 1.05	2.65**
Don't look feminine/masculine	125	1.94	(1.4)	1.69 – 2.19	89	0.87	(1.1)	0.63 – 1.10	6.18***
Level of sexual experience	58	1.81	(1.4)	1.43 – 2.19	19	0.95	(1.1)	0.43 – 1.47	2.39*
Teased about PMS/period (testosterone)	150	0.69	(1.0)	0.54 – 0.85	15	0.53	(0.8)	0.07 – 1.00	0.62
Called name like “butch” etc. (wimp etc.)	75	1.36	(1.4)	1.04 – 1.68	74	0.61	(0.9)	0.40 – 0.82	3.90***
Put down females (males) in general	221	1.22	(1.2)	1.06 – 1.38	89	0.42	(0.8)	0.25 – 0.59	6.82***
Unwelcome/crude compliment	138	1.91	(1.4)	1.68 – 2.15	40	0.83	(0.9)	0.55 – 1.10	5.95***
Sexual cartoon or sexual joke	117	0.75	(1.0)	0.57 – 0.94	34	0.56	(0.8)	0.27 – 0.85	1.02
Flashed or “mooned” you	108	0.31	(0.7)	0.19 – 0.44	55	0.35	(0.9)	0.09 – 0.60	-0.24
Sexual gesture or stare	217	0.95	(1.2)	0.80 – 1.11	84	0.13	(0.4)	0.04 – 0.22	9.13***
Followed or pestered for a date	106	1.34	(1.2)	1.11 – 1.57	41	0.95	(1.3)	0.55 – 1.36	1.74
Yelled, whistled, or howled	219	0.73	(1.0)	0.59 – 0.86	65	0.12	(0.6)	0.01 – 0.26	6.27***
Touched, grabbed, or pinched	160	1.16	(1.2)	0.98 – 1.34	81	0.16	(0.6)	0.03 – 0.29	8.79***
Stood too close or brushed against you	139	0.91	(1.1)	0.72 – 1.10	72	0.19	(0.7)	0.02 – 0.36	5.52***
Pulled at your clothing in a sexual way	63	1.62	(1.5)	1.24 – 2.00	40	0.35	(1.0)	0.03 – 0.67	5.11***
Blocked or cornered in a sexual way	62	1.00	(1.1)	0.73 – 1.27	22	0.23	(0.9)	0.00 – 0.61	3.04**
Kissed or hugged against will	85	1.47	(1.2)	1.20 – 1.74	42	0.50	(0.8)	0.24 – 0.76	5.22***
Forced to do something sexual	35	2.94	(1.5)	2.44 – 3.45	14	0.64	(0.7)	0.21 – 1.07	7.21***

Note: R response Scale: 0 = not upsetting, 1 = slightly upsetting, 2 = somewhat upsetting, 3 = moderately upsetting, 4 = very upsetting.  
 \*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 \*\*\*p < .001. Multiple t tests were performed using the Bonferroni correction factor.

harassed, 11% reported making an informal complaint (e.g., to a teacher) and 7% reported making a formal complaint through the school system. When mean frequencies were examined, social support was found to be the most frequent response among girls, although it was used less than half the time when the student experienced sexual harassment.

## **Discussion**

### ***Gender Differences***

The results of this study corroborate the findings on gender differences of the AAUW (1993) and other studies but suggest that it is important to look beyond the more physically invasive forms of harassment. Indeed, because the harassment scale used in this study sampled more broadly from the domain of gender harassment than the AAUW questionnaire, the findings may offer greater insight into the phenomenon of gender harassment than those of other adolescent harassment studies. It was found that girls were more likely than boys to experience sexual harassment, and that they were likely to experience unwanted sexual attention (verbal, visual, and physical) slightly more often than gender harassment. However, except for forced sexual activity, gender harassment behaviours were generally appraised as more upsetting than sexual advances/imposition. This result contradicts that of Loreda, Reid, and Deaux (1995), who found that high-school students judged gender harassment to be the least severe form of sexual harassment; however, in that research, as in the AAUW study, the respondents were assessing a hypothetical situation. In the present study, being the object of sexual rumours and receiving negative comments or unwelcome or crude compliments about one's body were appraised as among the most harmful forms of harassment. It has been theorized that gender harassment serves to enforce traditional gender roles (Shakeshaft et al., 1995). For example, comments about physical appearance, whether positive or negative, "can serve to remind girls and women of the need to meet stereotypical standards of beauty" (White, 2000, p. 129), whereas spreading sexual rumours or referring to girls as "whores" or "sluts" reinforces the still pervasive double standard regarding sexual conduct. This is consistent with Shakeshaft et al.'s finding that girls who are either unattractive or physically more mature are likelier to be harassed, and explains why such seemingly contradictory comments (compliments and negative comments) about girls' bodies were appraised as almost equally upsetting. Boys also appraised gender harassment (generally from other boys) to be the most upsetting form of harassment — more upsetting than the sexual advances received from girls.

The girls appraised all forms of harassment as more upsetting than the boys. This gender difference in perception is consistent with the findings of other studies with elementary- and high-school students (e.g., Murnen & Smolak, 2000; Trigg & Wittenstrom, 1996). It may be partially due to a general emotional restriction among males (Polce-Lynch et al., 2001). It may also occur because girls are threatened by the very real possibility of escalating violence (Larkin, 1994) or because boys are socialized by their families and schools to be more accepting of all forms of aggressive behaviour and games of dominance (Hand & Sanchez, 2000). Boys are also far less likely than girls to feel shame about their sexuality (McMaster et al., 2002). However, the explanation may be more broad-based, for other researchers have found that adolescent girls tend to suffer more than adolescent boys from all kinds of social stressors (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). Gilligan (1982) suggests that women's identity and self-assessments are highly dependent on their relationships, whereas men's self-assessments are less fused to their relationships. Nonetheless, the overall ratings of distress were low, even among female students.

Although in this study a measure of social desirability was only weakly associated with reports of sexual harassment, other qualitative research evidence has suggested that adolescents discount sexual harassment behaviours as mere teasing that should not be taken too seriously (e.g., Berman et al., 2000; Larkin, 1994; McBride, 1998). Comments by students in the present study support this notion. For example, one Grade 9 girl rated being called a lesbian by other girls as *somewhat upsetting* but added the following comment on the questionnaire: "They were joking, but sometimes I take things seriously." Adolescents learn that they are not supposed to take such peer behaviour seriously; they apparently learn to excuse the harasser and to blame themselves for their feelings. Girls in particular may be striving to appear in control of their lives and therefore be reluctant to admit to adult researchers that events within their social network are unacceptable or distressing to them. It is possible that adolescents are encouraged to minimize their emotional reactions because of the current conservative backlash against feminism (Hand & Sanchez, 2000). Conversely, this reaction could be an unfortunate by-product of the earlier success of feminism. Girls who have repeatedly heard that females should be strong and in control may find it particularly difficult to admit that they have been victimized by a male. Boys may similarly hesitate to admit being bothered by a sex-related experience with a female because it indicates a lack of control over the situation.

The notion of attenuated appraisal is consistent with the present finding of increased prevalence of emotionally focused compared to behaviourally focused coping, among both girls and boys. It was speculated that girls would not confront the harasser or actively seek help from

school staff for fear of making the situation worse or of not being believed or taken seriously by staff. Passivity in coping, however, is not specific to sexual harassment. In a study of stress and coping among adolescents, Seiffge-Krenke (1995) found that passive coping was much more common than active coping, despite the adolescents' predictions that they would respond actively. Boys may also display less help-seeking behaviour in general because asking for help is considered "unmasculine."

In the present study, the youngest students, those in Grade 9, reported the highest rates of gender harassment. This was true for both sexes, thus reflecting same-gender harassment for the boys and cross-gender harassment for the girls. No statistically significant grade differences were found for sexual advances, although, among the boys, those in Grade 9 reported the highest level of sexual advances. These cross-gender harassment behaviours may be a reflection of girls' earlier pubertal maturation and a sexual interest that is not reciprocated by the boys in their age group. When assessing developmental trends, however, the grade structure of the schools should be taken into consideration, as harassment may occur across grade levels. For example, Grade 9 girls in a school that includes Grades 9 through 12 might experience higher levels of sexual advances than Grade 9 girls in a school that includes Grades 7 through 9, because they will have more encounters with older, more sexually mature boys. A strength of this study was its rigorous attention to appraisal and coping. Previously, only Fineran and Bennett (1999) had measured the adolescent's appraisal of the various sexual harassment behaviours experienced. It is also the first study with adolescents to incorporate the Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (Fitzgerald, 1996). Limitations include its correlational design, use of single-source data, and possibility of recall error. Finally, although an attempt was made to recruit a diverse group of adolescents by targeting a variety of schools and locations, the participants may not be representative of the student populations of the two provinces.

### ***Implications for School Health Programs and Other Preventive Interventions***

Despite the above limitations, the results offer guidance for school health research and practice. The higher rates of harassment among Grade 9 students, coupled with other empirical evidence showing that sexual harassment begins in the lower grades, suggest that prevention efforts should be instituted well before children reach high school. The high incidence of gender harassment and its negative appraisal by adolescents suggest that gender harassment should not be excluded from sexual harassment definitions and policies, and that sexual harassment prevention should be included as part of more general anti-bullying interven-

tions (McMaster, Connolly, Peplar, & Craig, 1997). Preventive efforts may be furthered if gender-related derogatory comments, teasing about promiscuity, insults or vulgar comments about people's bodies, and inappropriate sexual advances are conceptualized as part of an escalating school climate of decreased empathy, interpersonal disrespect, bullying, and violence (Hand & Sanchez, 2000).

### ***The Role of the Nurse***

The public health or school health nurse is ideally situated to bring a population-based perspective to the prevention of sexual harassment and the amelioration of its sequelae among adolescents, by ensuring that sexual harassment, and the issue of the social environment, are considered important aspects of comprehensive school health programming. More specifically, as part of the school health team, nurses can contribute to primary and secondary prevention by advocating for, and participating in, the development of sexual harassment policies, procedures for responding to complaints, and the inclusion of sexual harassment in life skills curricula. Nurses can help high-school students become more adept at recognizing stressful situations and assessing the efficacy of their coping responses. They can also promote healthful ways of coping with stress. Finally, nurses should be alert to the potential for gendered violence, whether in intimate relationships or at the school or community level; it has been theorized that tolerance of sexual harassment in schools encourages the victimization of girls through sexual assault and dating violence and promotes abusive behaviour in boys (Stein, 1995).

Gender has come to be recognized as a powerful determinant of health, and the findings from this study related to gender harassment and same-gender harassment among male adolescents indicate that gender-related power can be used against both sexes. The results should generate concern that boys who are targeted for frequent gender harassment will become victims of rougher forms of bullying. Thus, the school nurse should not neglect gender harassment as a potential health issue among male students. The nurse should also advocate that life skills curricula include an exploration of gender construction in addition to discussions of healthy sexuality and relationships, social skills training, and assertiveness skill-building for intimate relationships.

### **Conclusion**

This study has described the sexual harassment experiences of a diverse group of male and female students in Grades 9 through 11. One of the unexpected findings was that both male and female students reported gender harassment to be more upsetting than unwanted sexual advances.

Moreover, the examination of gender differences in adolescents' rates of victimization, appraisal of the situation, and methods of coping serves to inform our understanding of sexual harassment as a function of gender — that is, the findings support the notion that our social construction of gender influences the perpetration of various forms of sexual harassment among males and females, by males and females, and the notion that adolescents' gendered experiences influence how they appraise and cope with that harassment.

## References

- American Association of University Women Educational Foundation. (1993). *Hostile hallways: The AAUW survey on sexual harassment in America's schools*. Washington: Author.
- Berman, H., McKenna, K., Arnold, C. T., Taylor, G., & MacQuarrie, B. (2000). Sexual harassment: Everyday violence in the lives of girls and women. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 22(4), 32–46.
- Bogart, K., Simmons, S., Stein, N., & Tomaszewski, E. P. (1992). Breaking the silence: Sexual and gender-based harassment in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. In S. S. Klein (Ed.), *Sex equity and sexuality in education* (pp. 191–221). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Compas, B. E., Davis, G. E., Forsythe, C. J., & Wagner, B. M. (1987). Assessment of major and daily stressful events during adolescence: The Adolescent Perceived Events Scale. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 55, 534–541.
- Dahinten, V. S. (2001). *Peer sexual harassment: A social determinant of adolescent health?* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- Dahinten, V. S. (2002). *Coping with peer sexual harassment in adolescence*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Fineran, S., & Bennett, L. (1999). Gender and power issues of peer sexual harassment among teenagers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 14, 626–641.
- Fitzgerald, L. F. (1996, September). Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (CHQ) research notes. Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.
- Fitzgerald, L. F., Shullman, S. L., Bailey, N., Richards, M., Swecker, J., Gold, Y., Ormerod, M., & Weitzman, L. (1988). The incidence and dimensions of sexual harassment in academia and the workplace. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 32, 152–175.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hand, J. Z., & Sanchez, L. (2000). Badgering or bantering? Gender differences in experience of, and reactions to, sexual harassment among U.S. high school students. *Gender and Society*, 14, 718–746.



- Hotelling, K., & Zuber, B. A. (1997). Feminist issues in sexual harassment. In W. O'Donohue (Ed.), *Sexual harassment: Theory, research, and treatment* (pp. 99–111). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Koss, M. P., Goodman, L. A., Browne, A., Fitzgerald, L. F., Keita, G. P., & Russo, N. F. (1994). *No safe haven*. Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Larkin, J. (1994). *Sexual harassment: High school girls speak out*. Toronto: Second Story Press.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer.
- Lee, V. L., Croninger, R. G., Linn, E., & Chen, X. (1996). The culture of sexual harassment in secondary schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 33, 383–417.
- Loredo, C., Reid, A., & Deaux, K. (1995). Judgments and definitions of sexual harassment by high school students. *Sex Roles*, 32, 29–45.
- Magley, V. J. (1999). The structure and function of coping with sexual harassment. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 60(9-B), 4944 (#AAI9944930).
- Magley, V. J., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1996, June). *Coping with sexual harassment: Reconceptualizing women's resistance*. Paper presented at meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago.
- McBride, K. A. (1998). *Dynamics around peer to peer sexual harassment: A narrative study of adolescents' perspectives*. Doctoral dissertation, Miami University. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59(3-B) (University Microfilms #AAM98-28464).
- McMaster, L. E., Connolly, J., Peplar, D., & Craig, W. M. (1997, June). *Peer-to-peer sexual harassment in early adolescence: A developmental perspective*. Paper presented at meeting of the Canadian Psychological Association, Toronto.
- McMaster, L. E., Connolly, J., Peplar, D., & Craig, W. M. (2002). Peer-to-peer sexual harassment among early adolescents: A developmental perspective. *Developmental Psychopathology*, 14, 91–106.
- Murnen, S. K., & Smolak, L. (2000). The experience of sexual harassment among grade-school students: Early socialization of female subordination? *Sex Roles*, 43, 1–17.
- Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation. (1995). *Student to student sexual harassment: Final report on phase 1*. Toronto: Author.
- Polce-Lynch, M., Myers, B. J., Kliewer, W., & Kilmartin, C. (2001). Adolescent self-esteem and gender: Exploring relations to sexual harassment, body image, media influence, and emotional expression. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 30, 225–243.
- Schneider, K. T., Swan, S., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1997). Job-related and psychological effects of sexual harassment in the workplace: Empirical evidence from two organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82, 401–415.
- Seiffge-Krenke, I. (1995). *Stress, coping, and relationships in adolescence*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Shakeshaft, C., Barber, E., Hergenrother, M. A., Johnson, Y. M., Mandel, L. S., & Sawyer, J. (1995). Peer harassment in schools. *Journal for a Just and Caring Education*, 1(1), 30–44.

- Stein, N. (1995). Sexual harassment in school: The public performance of gendered violence. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65, 145–162.
- Stein, N., Marshall, N. L., & Tropp, L. R. (1993). *Secrets in public: Sexual harassment in our schools*. Wellesley, MA: Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College.
- Trigg, M., & Wittenstrom, K. (1996). “That’s the way the world really goes”: Sexual harassment and New Jersey teenagers. *Initiatives*, 57(2), 55–65.
- White, A. L. (1997). *Self-reported sexual harassment in the schools: Defining and measuring the construct*. Unpublished manuscript, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- White, A. L. (2000). *Understanding peer sexual harassment among older male adolescents*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

### **Author’s Note**

The author gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of the British Columbia Health Research Foundation studentship program.

Comments or questions may be directed to V. Susan Dahinten, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, T201-2211 Wesbrook Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 2B5 Canada. Telephone: 604-822-7437. Fax: 604-822-7466. E-mail: dahinten@nursing.ubc.ca

---

*V. Susan Dahinten, PhD, RN, is Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.*