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**PEER SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND PEER VIOLENCE:
SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDREN AT RISK**

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a 1997 study of peer sexual harassment and peer violence in a sample of 261 South African adolescents age 14 to 18. Seventy-nine percent of South African students report experiencing some form of sexual harassment by peers and 78% of South African students report perpetrating sexual harassment to peers at school.

Girls were found to experience a higher frequency of sexual harassment and physical violence than boys. A power scale measuring male dominance indicated that boys scored significantly higher than girls on the endorsement of male social role power and perpetrated significantly more sexual harassment and physically and sexually violent behaviours than girls. Girls found the experience of sexual harassment, physical violence and sexual violence to be significantly more threatening than boys. With regard to peer relationships, girls report experiencing significantly more sexual harassment from peers they did not know and peers whom they had dated than did boys. Similarly, girls also reported experiencing significantly more physical violence and sexual violence from peers they had dated.

The advent of major social change in South Africa affords an opportunity to study students from this diverse culture with regard to their experience of peer sexual harassment and peer violence in school. This paper reports on peer sexual harassment, physical and sexual violence in a sample of 261 South African adolescents age 14 to 18. This report is based on data collected in a 1997 study of peer sexual harassment and peer violence among South African high school students.

For the purposes of this study peer sexual harassment is defined as unwanted or unwelcome behaviours, such as making sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks; showing sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages or notes; writing sexual messages or graffiti on bathroom walls or locker rooms; spreading sexual rumours; calling someone gay or lesbian in a malicious manner; spying on someone dressing or showering at school; "flashing" or "mooning" someone; touching, grabbing, or pinching in a sexual way; pulling at clothing in a sexual way; intentionally brushing against someone in a sexual way; pulling clothing off or down; blocking or cornering in a sexual way; and forcing a kiss or forcing other unwelcome sexual behaviour other than kissing (American Association of University Women, 1993; Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, 1995; Stein, Marshall & Tropp, 1993).

Recent studies in the United States found that sexual harassment experienced by students in the school environment interferes with their social development and negatively impacts on their mental health and overall school performance (American Association of University Women, 1993; Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, 1995; Stein *et al.* (1993). To date the occurrence of sexual harassment in schools has received little attention in South Africa and most research on children in South Africa has focused on the negative effects of community violence and school

violence on child mental health. All research conducted on sexual harassment in South Africa has involved university students who are adults.

In 1985 Wayson observed that school violence had become synonymous with physical violence perpetrated by school children within the school environment. We do know that studies of violence have largely concluded that violence begets violence (Widom, 1989; McKendrick & Hoffman, 1991; Straker, 1990). Ramphele states that "it is not surprising that South African children and adolescents have been caught up in the cycle both as victims and perpetrators of violence" (Ramphele, 1997:1190). Our research in the United States lends support to the belief that schools are violent and that both the victimisation of students by peers and perpetration of violence to peers are significant problems (Bennett & Fineran, 1998; Fineran & Bennett 1999).

The purpose of this study is to describe the incidence of peer sexual harassment (PSH), peer physical violence (PPV) and peer sexual violence (PSV) in a sample of South African adolescents and explore the inter-relationship between these forms of abuse.

PROBLEM

Peer sexual harassment

Although few, the studies documenting sexual harassment at several South African universities lend support to defining this issue as a problem for students (Braine, Bless & Fox, 1995; Gouws & Kritzinger, 1995; Mayekiso & Bhana, 1997). Gouws and Kritzinger (1995) conducted a random sample study of students at the University of Stellenbosch and found a higher percentage of women than men experienced sexist comments, grading on basis of appearance, repeated unwelcome invitations, and unwanted touching and fondling. Braine *et al.* (1995) and Mayekiso and Bhana (1997) found similar results in convenience samples conducted at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus and the University of Transkei, respectively. None of the studies measured the effects of sexual harassment on academic performance or the mental health effects of victimisation, although Gouws and Kritzinger (1995) found that female students who had been sexually assaulted experienced shame and stigmatisation in reporting their abuse.

All three studies examined sexual harassment experienced from peers and found that both male and female students identified sexual harassment on campus from peers as problematic. When examining harassment from school personnel, Mayekiso and Bhana (1997) found that 35% of students identified academic staff as perpetrators of sexual harassment, while 28% of students identified administrative staff as harassers. Eight percent of students surveyed by Braine *et al.* (1995) perceived academic staff to be responsible for sexual harassment and Gouws and Kritzinger (1995) found that 2,8% of male students and 7% of female students were asked for sexual favours in exchange for more favourable grades.

Recommendations for ending sexual harassment in all three studies included developing policies that define sexual harassment and grievance procedures for reporting sexual harassment. Braine *et al.* (1995) and Mayekiso and Bhana (1997) identified areas on campus where sexual harassment primarily occurred. Women's and men's residences were identified as problematic, as well as campus parties, campus grounds and the student union. Gouws and Kritzinger (1995) identified the campus culture as promoting a sexist or anti-woman atmosphere through the practice of freshman "panty raids" on female residences, "showering" where women students are caught and dragged into male residences and showered while dressed, and social dinners called "chicken and rooster" dinners that contribute to a climate of date rape. All three studies supported training for male and female students regarding sexual harassment and that males in particular would benefit

from sensitivity training around this issue. To date no research on sexual harassment and school-age children in South Africa has been published.

Sexual harassment is a form of interpersonal violence, existing on a continuum with bullying, partner violence, stalking and homicide. Peer sexual harassment is often learned through a combination of observation and reinforced practice in the context of normative support. While males and females both employ peer sexual harassment, its rate and effect are not equivalent between genders. Previous US studies have found that the rate of sexual harassment of males drops from 70% to 5% in the transition from school to the workplace, but the sexual harassment of females remains above 50% (Fitzgerald, 1993; USMSPB, 1981, 1987). Use of sexual harassment is considered a rational, individual choice; however, the response to sexual harassment often reflects a paradigm of individual deviancy rather than cultural sanction. The risk for sexual harassment is likely to be influenced by environmental and cultural factors.

Peer violence

Research on children and adolescents who are victims of peer violence is underdeveloped in South Africa (Ramphele, 1997; Cross, 1993). Most published research to date has consisted of a few cross-sectional and longitudinal studies where sample sizes are quite small (none larger than 78). In general, most studies have associated violence with the extreme poverty that exists throughout South African townships. Except for one study that examined school-related violence in the context of an impoverished community (Burnett, 1998), the school system has not been the primary focus of research. Several small, qualitative studies provide insight into the experience of children in schools (Burnett, 1998; Ramphele, 1997; Van den Aardweg, 1987). These studies report that schools use corporal punishment regularly and that children endure verbal abuse and personal denigration from teachers and school administrators. Oosthuizen (1994) comments that the *in loci parentis* position of the teachers and school administrators allows them to design rules and inflict punishment on students who have little power in the school environment. Burnett (1998) reports that children in her study experienced an average of three incidents of school-related violence per week. Anecdotally, children and adolescents have observed their school environment to be violent not only because of adults, but peers as well.

US research on sexual harassment and children

Research on sexual harassment among students has focused primarily on sexual harassment that occurs in junior high and high schools (Fineran & Bennett, 1998). In all, there have been 8 surveys conducted on adolescent sexual harassment (American Association of University Women (AAUW), 1993; Fineran & Bennett, 1999; Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW), 1995; Roscoe, Strouse & Goodwin, 1994; Stein *et al.* 1993; Trigg & Wittenstrom, 1996; Stratton & Backes, 1997; Strauss & Espeland, 1992).

Five of the eight surveys focused primarily on determining the incidence of sexual harassment in high school and junior high (AAUW, 1993; PCSW, 1995; Stein *et al.* 1993; Trigg & Wittenstrom, 1996; Stratton & Backes, 1997), two surveys also addressed the types of relationships that the students had with one another (PCSW, 1995, Fineran & Bennett, 1999). In addition, Fineran and Bennett (1999) examined aspects of cultural and personal power in the perpetration and experience of sexual harassment and peer violence.

Gender

Gender has been identified as a risk factor in many adult studies of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald; Shullman; Baily; Richards; Swecker; Gold; Oremerod & Weitzman, 1988; Fitzgerald, 1990; Gutek, 1985; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1987). It has been estimated that over

50% of women in the U.S. workforce have been sexually harassed and that women are the primary victims and men the primary instigators of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald, Hulin and Drasgow, 1995). Studies have also shown that adult males in the U.S. workforce experience sexual harassment at much lower rates than women (2% to 15%) and that frequently the instigators are other males (Fitzgerald, *et al*, 1988; USMPB, 1981, 1987).

Gender also figures considerably in peer sexual harassment and peer violence in schools. Although prevalence studies have found that girls and boys both report perpetrating and experiencing sexual harassment, girls are found to be victimised more frequently than boys, while boys perpetrate sexual harassment more frequently than girls (AAUW, 1993; PCSW, 1995; Bennett & Fineran, 1998; Fineran & Bennett, 1999). Research also supports the view that victimised girls are more threatened and upset by sexual harassment and peer violence than boys who experience sexual harassment (AAUW, 1993; PCSW, 1995; Bennett & Fineran, 1998; Fineran & Bennett, 1999).

Power

Sexual harassment has been described as a power imbalance that stems from patriarchal society where men inherently have more informal power than women (MacKinnon, 1979). In both the workplace and educational setting sexual harassment frequently consists of misogynous statements or behaviours that convey sexist attitudes and contribute to a hostile workplace and educational environment for women.

Power has not been a variable of interest in many of the sexual harassment studies conducted in the schools. This lack may be explained by the fact that, although schools may be viewed as hierarchical and the power differential is evident for teacher to student harassment, this construct does not readily support peer harassment that occurs among a community of peers in school. In a secondary analysis of the AAUW data, (Lee, Croninger, Linn & Chen, 1996) suggest that abuse of societal power and the privileging of men over women is reflected in teen peer sexual harassment. Our earlier research also found that societal power that supports male dominance was correlated with the perpetration of both sexual harassment and peer violence among high school students and that sexually harassing behaviours appear to be ubiquitous and normative among adolescents (Bennett & Fineran, 1999).

We view peer sexual harassment as an early form of gender-based dominance and control, which may take the form of teasing, bullying, harassment, dating violence, rape and domestic violence. Educators and mental health practitioners alike may be concerned that these patriarchal beliefs contribute to a hostile school environment, which in turn sets off the following chain of events: girls are denied access to an equal educational experience that may in turn contribute to a reduction in academic performance, which ultimately limits career choices.

Relationships

The types of relationships that teens have with peers in school may be an important factor in defining the context of peer sexual harassment and peer violence. Peer relationships as defined in this study include dating relationships, long-term friendships, school acquaintances and interactions with students other than friends or dating partners. These relationships determine how familiar students are with one another, which in turn affects their day to day interactions. A teen couple breaking up will have a very different school relationship with one another than two school acquaintances. Our prior US research indicates that sexually harassed students were victimised most frequently by schoolmates who were casual acquaintances, and the frequency of physical violence victimisation by dating or ex-dating schoolmates was significantly greater than the frequency of physical violence between unknown and casually known peers (Bennett & Fineran, 1999).

This study examines the prevalence of peer sexual harassment, peer physical violence and peer sexual violence in a sample of South African high school students. We hypothesise a relationship between power, gender, and the experience and perpetration of peer sexual harassment, and peer physical and sexual violence. On the basis of previous studies we hypothesise that most students will report being the victim of peer sexual harassment but female students will experience a higher frequency of sexual harassment and sexual and physical violence victimisation than boys and perceive this harassment and violence as more threatening than boys. In addition, we hypothesise a significant correlation between peer sexual harassment and severe physical and sexual violence.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and procedure

A non-probability sample of 261 high school students from four urban schools in the Johannesburg area of South Africa answered questions about frequency of victimisation, perpetration and reaction to sexual harassment, including questions about peer relationships. Student ages ranged from 14 to 18 years. Additional descriptors of the students appear in Table 1.

TABLE 1
HIGH SCHOOL SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Number in Sample		261
Mean Age		16,4
Grade level	Standard 6	9,7%
	Standard 7	7,0
	Standard 9	41,9
	Matric	40,7
	Other	1,7
Race / Culture	African	34,8 %
	Mixed Race	55,5
	White	3,9
	Indian	0,4
	Asian	2,7
	Other	2,7
Gender	Girls	65%
	Boys	35

The criterion variable for this study is frequency of peer sexual harassment experienced during the school year. This measure is the sum of 12 ordinal items (never to very frequently) taken from the literature and previously utilised with 463 US high school students (Bennett & Fineran, 1998; Fineran & Bennett 1999). Our prior work found sexual harassment related to gender, relationship (dating, known peer, unknown peer), and endorsement of male dominance beliefs. Sexual harassment is a substantially different experience for boys and girls, so data are analysed separately for each gender.

RESULTS

The percentage of students experiencing and perpetrating peer sexual harassment, physical abuse and sexual abuse is arranged in Table 2 by gender. Seventy-nine percent of South African students report experiencing some form of sexual harassment by peers at school. It appears that not only is

peer sexual harassment victimisation normative, but so is perpetration of peer sexual harassment, where 78% of South African students also report perpetrating sexual harassment on peers at school during the school year.

The relationship between gender and frequency of experience and perpetration of sexual harassment, physical and sexual violence is explored through the use of the Mann-Whitney U test. When we examine gender differences for sexual harassment, girls experience significantly more sexual harassment than boys ($Z = -1.98, P < .05$), and boys perpetrate significantly more sexual harassment than girls ($Z = -2.30, P < .05$).

Students answered questions about the sexual and severe physical violence they experience from schoolmates. Physical violence is defined as being punched, kicked or beaten, and sexual violence included being pressured to do something sexual a student did not want to do, attempted rape or rape. Forty-three percent of the South African students report experiencing physical violence from their schoolmates and 36% report perpetrating physical violence, while 28% of South African students report experiencing sexual violence and 6% report perpetrating sexual violence against their schoolmates.

Similar to the results on sexual harassment between peers, the Mann-Whitney U test indicates there are significant differences by gender for physical violence. Girls experience significantly more physical violence than boys ($Z = -1.98, P < .05$), and boys perpetrate significantly more physical violence than girls ($Z = -4.91, P < .01$). Sexual violence victimisation did not reflect a statistical difference by gender, but for sexual violence perpetration boys were found to perpetrate significantly more sexual violence than girls ($Z = -3.84, P < .01$).

TABLE 2
INCIDENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT, PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE VICTIMISATION AND PERPETRATION AND MEAN THREAT OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT, PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE BY GENDER

N=208 SOUTH AFRICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

	PREVALENCE: %		PREVALENCE: %		MEAN THREAT ¹	
	VICTIMISATION		PERPETRATION			
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Sexual Harassment	75	82 ^a	77 ^a	79	6,18	11,15 ^c
Physical Violence	24	29 ^a	50 ^b	26	0,77	1,56 ^c
Sexual Violence	24	29	10 ^b	0.6	1,13	2,75 ^c

¹Based on a 4-point scale, 1 (not at all) to 4 (extremely threatened or upset). The level of significance corresponds to t-tests.

² Note: a $p < .05$. b $p < .01$. c $p < .001$.

With regard to perpetration of sexual harassment, physical violence and sexual violence and power, t-test results revealed gender differences for social role power. Boys scored significantly higher than girls on the endorsement of male social role power ($t = -5.16, p < .01$) and perpetrated significantly more sexual harassment and physically and sexually violent behaviours. Similar to

other studies, results here indicate girls found the experience of sexual harassment, physical violence and sexual violence to be significantly more threatening than boys (See Table 2).

Students were also asked about their peer relationships and whether they experienced sexual harassment, physical violence or sexual violence from schoolmates they knew casually, schoolmates they have dated or who they are currently dating, or students who attend their school whom they do not know (See Table 3).

TABLE 3
SEXUAL HARASSMENT (SH), PHYSICAL VIOLENCE (PV), AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE (SV) BY PEER RELATIONSHIP

SELF-REPORTING VICTIMS (%)

	Stranger			Known peer			Intimate		
	SH	PV	SV	SH	PV	SV	SH	PV	SV
Boys	32,4	11,1	5,6	60,0	17,8	21,1	24,3	3,3	11,1
Girls	51,7	9,5	15,5	66,3	25,6	29,2	38,9	11,3	17,3

Both boys and girls report similar accounts for the experience of sexual harassment, physical and sexual violence from peers they know casually at school. However, girls report experiencing significantly more sexual harassment from peers they did not know ($Z = -2.28, P < .05$) and peers whom they had dated ($Z = -2.21, p < .05$) than did boys. Similarly, girls also reported experiencing significantly more physical violence ($Z = -2.14, P < .05$) and sexual violence ($Z = -2.50, P < .01$) from peers they had dated.

TABLE 4
CORRELATIONS OF PEER RELATIONSHIP VICTIMISATION VARIABLES

		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Sexual Harassment										
A	Stranger	-	,16*	,04	,32**	-,02	-,05	,53**	,03	,07
B	Known	-	-	,09	,10	,27**	,05	,04	,71**	-,02
C	Intimate	-	-	-	,01	,06	,27**	-,07	,06	,70**
Physical Violence										
D	Stranger	-	-	-	-	,02	-,01	,11	,03	,04
E	Known	-	-	-	-	-	-,07	,01	,14*	-,00
F	Intimate	-	-	-	-	-	-	-,03	,06	,26**
Sexual Violence										
G	Stranger	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	,04	-,02
H	Known	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-,01
I	Intimate	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 4 arrays the Spearman correlation matrix for the experience of sexual harassment, physical violence and sexual violence by peer relationship. Relationships with unknown, known and intimate peers and sexual harassment, physical violence, and sexual violence victimisation show a strong correlation with one another.

DISCUSSION

The data support a concern that sexual harassment between high school peers in this South African sample is widespread and that for girls the frequency of sexual harassment and physical violence is greater than for boys. In this research we link the frequency of peer sexual harassment and peer violence behaviour to beliefs about male dominance. Boys have stronger beliefs regarding male dominance and were found to be more likely than girls to perpetrate sexual harassment, and physical and sexual violence.

Girls in South Africa experience a higher frequency of sexually harassing behaviours and peer violence in general from schoolmates they do not know or schoolmates they have dated. This is in contrast to our findings in US schools where girls experience more of these behaviours from schoolmates they know casually. There may be cultural factors that mediate the types of relationships students have with one another in these very different cultures.

The primary limitation of the study is the use of a non-probability sample which limits the generalisability of the findings and the use of single-item measures for physical and sexual violence. Students were also asked to identify harassing and violent behaviours that occurred during the school year and to select one example for each behaviour. This limits how students answer the questions and narrows their reporting of the harassment and/or violence they may have experienced to only one school year.

In view of the fact that these data were collected from students at school who were reporting on their school environment, these are disturbing rates of peer sexual harassment and peer violence. In terms of hostile environment issues within the schools, girls found sexual harassment and physical and sexual violence to be more threatening than boys. The data support the need for schools to address safety issues for boys and girls and indicate that girls in particular are at risk of experiencing violence.

Educators should note that the majority of students are affected by either direct experience of these behaviours or through participant observation and that the safety and education of all students may be compromised by a hostile environment. School social workers have the responsibility to advocate that students be educated in a nurturing, positive environment. This study indicates that sexual harassment and peer violence is a gender issue and that there is a need for education and training that encourages a more egalitarian environment and discourages discrimination against girls.

Suggestions for future research include investigating the effects of peer violence and sexual harassment on children's developmental stages and overall physical and mental health. Additional arenas of research may include the development of new prevention approaches to create safer school environments and training that effectively address peer violence and sexual harassment in schools for both boys and girls. It appears important to consider the contributions of the school environment to child and adolescent mental health and student perception of safety. Students who are feeling threatened and upset by behaviours they experience from either peers or adults at school, family members or members of their community are not likely to be functioning at an optimal learning level. Physical and sexual violence of any sort from any environment can be an overwhelming distraction from the rigors of education and contribute to a multitude of health and mental health problems.

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