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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Everyday Victimization of Adolescent Girls by Boys: Sexual Harassment, Bullying or Aggression?

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Abstract School-based sexual harassment of adolescent girls by boys appears commonplace, yet aggression and bullying studies rarely yield sexualized material. This qualitative Australian study with 72 14- to 15-year-olds and 7 teachers aimed to discover whether interviewer use of neutral language in gender-segregated focus groups and interviews would yield material indicating that the victimization of girls by boys is sexualized. Verbal and indirect victimization were reported to be everyday occurrences, and almost entirely sexual. Findings are discussed in the light of definitions of sexual harassment, bullying and aggression. It is concluded that the term "sexual bullying" appropriately captures the gendered power structure underlying these behaviors. As such, they need to be understood, and become visible, more broadly than in terms of individual pathology.

Keywords Adolescence · Aggression · Bullying · Sexual harassment · Victimization

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Introduction

During adolescence, cross-gender social contact becomes more prominent than in childhood (e.g., Pellegrini 2001), providing more opportunities not only for cross-gender friendships and romantic relationships, but also for cross-gender victimization. For present purposes, the term "victimization" is used to cover a range of behaviors identified as having the potential to cause harm, not to indicate that those receiving these behaviors are necessarily helpless in the face of them. This qualitative study used focus groups and interviews with girls, boys and teachers and yielded data in a range of areas. We have previously published a broad overview (Owens et al. 2005a, b) and a paper on participant explanations for victimizing behaviors (Owens et al. 2007). The present paper focuses more specifically on the sexualized aspect of victimization, aiming to cast light on the disparity between the sexual harassment literature, where sexualized victimization is central, and the bullying and aggression literatures, where it is peripheral or absent. As such, this paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of adolescent girls' victimization by boys, from the perspectives of both involved parties and observers (teachers). Such understanding is crucial for the development of effective prevention and intervention measures to minimize harm to adolescent girls.

Cross-gender victimization is especially relevant in the coeducational high school setting and, as discussed below, there is evidence from three research literatures—bullying, aggression and sexual harassment—that girls in this context are at particular risk. This is as true in the Australian context (e.g., Bayliss 1995) as elsewhere (e.g., Duncan 1999—UK; Paul 2003—USA; Timmerman 2003—Netherlands). Indeed, regardless of the many definitional and data-gathering differences within and across nations, it seems safe to say

that research on school violence, in its various guises, shows many commonalities across nations (Slee 2003). A major difference is apparent, however, across disciplinary boundaries: it is a curious fact that, while the sexual harassment literature provides much evidence that sexualized victimization of adolescent girls by boys is commonplace, the sexual element is largely missing from the bullying and aggression literatures (Slee 2003).

This is probably due to different theoretical traditions (and their associated methodologies) that drive the nature of the questions asked. In the sexual harassment literature, the sociocultural model views harassing behaviors as arising from culturally legitimated gendered power differentials (Welsh 1999), which can render victimizing behaviors and resultant female disadvantage invisible (Larkin 1994). The feminist influence which has raised awareness of girls' disadvantage through sociological and educational studies has been much slower to penetrate mainstream developmental psychology research (Slee and Shute 2003), where most of the aggression and bullying literature is to be found. We can raise the question, therefore, as to whether studies of bullying and aggression have often overlooked the importance of sexualized elements, particularly in boys' victimization of girls.

The present study therefore addresses the question: if we seek information about boys' victimization of girls in a way that avoids specific terms such as aggression, bullying and sexual harassment, will sexualized victimization emerge as an important issue? Such an approach cannot easily be taken in quantitative studies, such as questionnaire studies, where the terms under consideration must generally be defined for respondents, but is more readily achieved using qualitative methods underpinned by more neutral language and the careful use of probes when necessary.

In the sexual harassment literature, definitions of sexual harassment are not always provided, but legally, it is often defined in terms of how the behavior is received by the victim, i.e., if an unwelcome behavior has a sexual element and it is reasonable in the circumstances that the person feels offended, intimidated or humiliated then sexual harassment has occurred (e.g., South Australian Equal Opportunities Act 1984). Although legislation proscribing sexual harassment may not cover children and young adolescents, there is evidence that such behaviors by boys occur from an early age (Bayliss 1995) and are frequently experienced by girls in high school (Collins 1997). Hand and Sanchez (2000) found that girls report more severe, intrusive and intimidating sexual harassment than boys as they grow older. Girls experience serious negative effects, such as choosing their academic subjects on the basis of avoiding it, and wanting to leave the school (Bayliss 1995).

In contrast with the sexual harassment literature, which is mainly focused on victimization of girls by boys, aggression and bullying research has mainly focused on same-gender relationships. Whereas sexual harassment is defined in terms of how it is received, definitions of aggression and bullying depend upon perpetrator intentionality to harm. Bullying is generally defined as a specific form of aggression that involves an imbalance or abuse of power and is often seen as ongoing (e.g., Sullivan 2000). The negative effects of bullying on victims' physical, psychological and social wellbeing are well-established (e.g., Slee 1998). Although boys are generally more bullied than girls, girls in coeducational high schools are more bullied than those in single-sex schools, and at a level similar to boys (Rigby 1998). Tulloch (1995) found that girls are as bullied as boys in the first year of high school, and that girl victims report being physically bullied, picked on and teased more by boys than by girls. She also found a preponderance of male bullies, even when the more stereotypically female indirect, or relational, forms of behavior were considered.

While bullying represents a small, but intense, proportion of victimization in schools, aggression more generally is widespread. The broader aggression literature concerns intention to harm, but not necessarily an imbalance of power or ongoing behavior. Crick et al. (1996) found that 9–12-year-old US students agreed that the most common form of cross-gender aggression was the verbal insult. Paquette and Underwood (1999) asked young adolescents to provide examples of aggression they had suffered: a significant minority, especially of the girls, gave cross-gender examples. Although physical aggression for boys was almost always from other boys, in nearly half the incidents of physical aggression towards girls, boys were the perpetrators. Furthermore, frequency of being subject to indirect aggression impacted more strongly on girls. While boys use less indirect aggression to their same-sex peers than do girls, when boys are aggressive to girls, they display more indirect aggression, especially in the case of older high school students (Russell and Owens 1999). Little is known, however, about the detailed nature and dynamics of this cross-gender indirectly aggressive behavior.

Recently, bridges have begun to be built between notions of bullying/aggression and sexual harassment. Two recent North American studies by researchers from the bullying tradition (McMaster et al. 2002; Pellegrini 2001) examined sexual harassment in studies of bullying, both finding, surprisingly, no gender differences in frequency of experiencing sexual harassment in early adolescence. Pellegrini proposed a specific methodological reason with regard to his observational study: some harassing behaviors by boys may not have occurred in view of the observers. McMaster et al., on the other hand, suggested that the lack of a gender

difference in their study might be real: perhaps girls' greater experience of sexual harassment does not occur until mid-adolescence, or maybe boys become desensitized to it as they grow older (in fact, accepting a recipient-based definition, these two suggestions amount to the same thing). Pellegrini's longitudinal study found that bullying (mainly carried out by boys) predicted sexual harassment, this relationship being mediated by frequency of dating. A drawback of his study was that the researchers were not permitted to ask questions about sexual harassment, and had to rely upon adult observers' ratings, which were at some distance and so depended upon overt behaviors, neglecting more covert behaviors as well as verbalizations. The present study, with the potential to yield information directly from participants about sexualized victimization, overcomes these limitations.

The above studies are rare in setting out to collect information about sexual harassment as well as bullying. The lack of detection of sexual harassment in bullying and aggression studies may be because most of the latter are quantitative studies that have used questionnaires that only ask general questions (e.g., about name-calling or prodding, either of which may or may not be sexually toned) (Land 2003). Furthermore, aggression and bullying questionnaires or interviews which address intention to harm or angry behavior may overlook sexual harassment, which may not be seen to have these features. Standardized questionnaires also tend to ask about isolated behaviors, with the context (which could be related to sexuality or gender relationships) being lost. Such discipline-related methodological issues may have contributed to the lack of information about sexual victimization in bullying and aggression research, despite clear evidence that it is a common occurrence in schools (e.g., Milligan and Thompson 1992).

Furthermore, insofar as sexual harassment is considered by bullying researchers, it tends to be treated as a separate concept from bullying, and as a characteristic of individual perpetrators and victims (e.g., Espelage and Holt 2007). By contrast, most of the sexual harassment literature sees broad societal influences as central, with a feminist or gender constructivist perspective being taken. Most such literature considers sexual harassment as largely perpetrated by males towards females, reflecting culturally entrenched male-female power differentials, in accord with the sociocultural theory of sexual harassment; for example, Bretherton et al. (1994) suggest that boys are socialized to believe that they have power over females.

Such an approach is endorsed by Duncan (1999), who carried out extensive ethnographic research in a number of UK Midlands schools, through group and individual interviews, case studies and classroom-practitioner observations across a seven-year period. That in-depth study led him to conclude that boy-to-girl bullying (and, indeed, much boy-to-boy bullying) can only be understood within the context of a culture of misogyny. Accordingly, he maintains that the distinction between sexual harassment and bullying is a false one; he uses the term "sexual bullying", maintaining that the majority not identified as bullies in psychological research nevertheless maintain the climate in which the minority of identifiable bullies operate. This approach is consistent with that of Martino (1997) in Australia, who has concluded that status is conferred by peers on adolescent boys who display a particular type of heterosexual masculinity which involves denigrating "anything that smacks of femininity" (p. 39). Under such a sociocultural approach, in seeking to understand the victimization of adolescent girls by boys, the differentiation of bullying, aggression and sexual harassment may be less important than an awareness of the sexual politics that underlie them all.

There are other indications that sexual harassment may not be best considered as a separate phenomenon from cross-gender bullying and aggression in schools. Both bullying and sexual harassment are regarded as abuses of power. Furthermore, aggression and sexual harassment may involve similar group processes; for example, Bayliss' (1995) report of a girl overhearing groups of boys apparently discussing her in sexual terms sounds very similar to a description of girls' indirect aggression taking the form of talking negatively about other girls just loud enough to make the victims suspect what is happening (Owens et al. 2000). Girls may join in the sexual harassment of their peers (Bayliss 1995), which is reminiscent of findings about witnesses to indirect aggression (Owens et al. 2000) and to bullying (Salmivalli et al. 1996). It may be, then, that in many respects similar group dynamics operate in the case of behaviors variously identified as sexual harassment, bullying or aggression.

While behaviors termed bullying are increasingly seen as unacceptable, there remains a degree of cultural acceptance of sexual harassment as "normal", not just by adolescents, but often by the teachers from whom girls seek help (Bayliss 1995; Tulloch 1995). Teachers may even blame the girls as sexually precocious (Chambers et al. 2004; Duncan 1999). These findings underscore the importance of taking teacher perspectives into account, as in the present study, since they are the ones charged with addressing victimization in schools and promoting positive student relationships.

Furthermore, while girls' perspectives on sexual harassment have often been explored, those of boys have been neglected. From within an aggression framework, girls and teachers report a higher prevalence of boy to girl victimization than do boys (Owens 1998). Also, Tulloch (1995) found girls to report more boy-to-girl bullying than did boys, and suggested that some behaviors that girls view as

bullying are seen by boys as "harmless fun." Clearly, it is important to obtain the perspectives of all these participants in the high school setting, and the qualitative approach of the present study permitted this, enabling a comparison of the views of the different participant groups. The study took a phenomenological approach whereby, within the context of the broad research question, the perspectives of participants were sought.

To reiterate, the overall research question was whether, without reference to the term sexual harassment, interviews would yield material about girls' victimization by boys that was sexual in nature; more specifically, this question was addressed with reference to (a) physical, (b) verbal and (c) indirect (covert) behaviors, as identified in the aggression literature. The interviews also addressed (d) what effects the behaviors had upon girls and (e) how girls reacted to the behaviors. The avoidance of the terms sexual harassment, bullying and aggression by the interviewer left the students and teachers free to describe cross-gender behaviors without the problems caused by differing interpretations of these terms: for example, Land (2003) found that students' own understanding of the term sexual harassment was limited to physical behaviors, while some respondents may consider the term to include serious sexual assault, such as rape, that is rare in the school context, or may exclude behaviors that would meet a legal definition of sexual harassment. The avoidance of pejorative terms (e.g., "bullying" and "harassment") for the behaviors of interest was also aimed at reducing the chances of socially desirable responding by the boys. Care was taken to ensure that questions were framed clearly within the context of cross-gender relationships in high school.

Method

Participants

The participants were from four public comprehensive coeducational secondary schools in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia, which we gave the pseudonyms of Balton, Hyland, Hills and Valley. All four schools were demographically similar, catering predominantly for students from white Anglo middle class backgrounds.

Participants were 40 girls and 32 boys from Year 9 (14- to 15-year-olds) and 7 teachers (four males and three females). All volunteering students who had parental consent, and who were able to attend group meetings at the appointed times during the school day, participated. Teachers with whom students are likely to discuss peer relationship issues, such as student counselors and year-level coordinators, were particularly invited to participate. No teachers from Valley accepted the invitation.

Procedure

Permission for the study was obtained from the State Education Department, University Research Ethics Committee and school principals, and written consent obtained from the adolescents and their parents. The study was presented as being about relationships between boys and girls in high schools. Focus groups were held during school hours on the school premises, conducted by a female Masters-qualified clinical psychologist experienced in working with young people.

Each focus group consisted of five to seven same-gender students, group composition being formed on the basis of availability of volunteers to attend a particular session. Following Owens et al. (2000), the procedure consisted of the presentation of a vignette followed by a semi-structured interview to address the research aims. The vignette for the girls' groups was as follows:

> Kylie is a new girl in your school. She joins Year 9 halfway through the year and doesn't know anyone in the school. On her first day, she goes to the canteen and buys some lunch. There is a group of boys from your class sitting together at one table, and a group of girls sitting together at another table. Kylie takes her lunch over to the boys' table and sits with them.

A parallel version for the boys featured Dean, who chose to sit with the girls. The group was asked what other boys, and girls, would be likely to think about this. The interview progressed to ask about reasons boys and girls often stick with members of their own gender, then progressed to asking what it was like when boys and girls did interact. When necessary, probes were used concerning physical, verbal and indirectly victimizing behaviors of boys towards girls by giving examples though, as explained earlier, the terms bullying, aggression and sexual harassment were not raised by the interviewer. If necessary, a probe question asked about whether the behaviors were sometimes about girls' bodies or appearance. Questions were asked about the nature of the behaviors of boys towards girls, why the behaviors happen, the characteristics of victims, effects on girls, how girls respond and views on intervention. The interview finally asked whether girls do these kinds of things to boys too. When no new issues seemed to be emerging (i.e., when saturation was reached), no more focus group interviews were held. The teacher interviews followed a similar format, but were held individually.

The audiotaped interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis conducted by the second author with the assistance of the NUD.IST software program. Themes were identified by reading the transcripts and placing each line of transcript under a thematic heading. Themes were added, re-named, or sub-themes added as further transcripts were

read and re-read, until all transcript material was categorized. Using these categories, approximately a fifth of the transcripts were coded by the other two authors and a graduate Education student unconnected with the project. There was approximately 85% agreement with the first coder. Any differences were discussed and resolved.

Results

The results are presented here in relation to the research questions, with illustrative quotes to underpin our interpretations. More detailed interpretations are provided in the Discussion. All themes identified occurred commonly across the schools unless otherwise stated; we have chosen particular quotes because they encapsulate certain points well, while also attempting to represent all schools overall, as well as boys', girls' and teachers' views. The interviewer is indicated by "I" and students by various other letters ascribed to them in the transcripts.

Physical Victimization

The first research question was whether sexualized material would be yielded with regard to physical victimization. Boys, girls and teachers agreed that physical victimization of girls by boys rarely occurred. One girl reported having been punched, kicked and jabbed by a boy, but no sexual content was mentioned. The boys reported that there was an "unwritten rule" about boys not hitting girls (though the reverse was not true), and that when physical contact occurred, it was in a spirit of fun or flirtation:

Balton boys Group 1

D: It would be playful hitting...

B: But, they just really want to touch each other pretty much [Laughter]

I: It's not serious hitting.

All: No

B: Just flirtation

The girls agreed that any hitting would be "only mucking around" (Balton girl). There was reference by the boys in one school to boys touching girls sexually:

Valley boys Group 2

F: Some guys just go up to a girl and grab her.

I: What? Tackle her?

F: No. Like grab her tits something like that.

They also claimed that some of the girls liked it, especially if it came from a boy they knew and liked. However, the same boy commented, "Doesn't happen that much." One teacher commented that, on rare occasions, touching of private parts occurred:

Hyland female Teacher 4

There are occasions where girls will actually go up and touch boys and then when the boys do it back then the girls call that harassment and you get back to the fact that girls are doing it as well.

Verbal Victimization

The second research question was whether sexualized material would be yielded with regard to verbal victimization. By contrast with the lack of physical attacks, numerous examples of verbal victimization were provided by the girls, and boys agreed with girls that this kind of victimization by boys was almost entirely sexual:

Balton girls Group 2

E: About boobs!

A: About their looks or their weight.

and

C: I have large breasts, and they pay me out about it. They all know my bra size and they tease me about it.

Hyland girl Group 1

Yeah, they say it to the person, they go up to you and go, you know, "you're a slut."

The pervasiveness of these behaviors was apparent:

Hills girls

All: Lots!

I: It happens a lot.

A: It happens all the time.

C: When you walk past if it's like a name, if you're in the classroom it's a name. Everywhere.

The girls were asked what kind of names they were called by boys, and these were almost universally related to sexuality or appearance:

Hills girls

Various girls: Skank; Cone; Whore; Bitch.

and

C: I get called a whale a lot.

and later

C: They pay you out if you're not the picture perfect long blonde hair, big boobs, long legs.

Hills girls

A: They shout it right in your face. They won't hold back.

D: Especially in front of their mates.

I: What kinds of things do they say when they do say it?

A: You are flat chested.

Valley girls

Bitch... Slut is common. Yes.

The teachers also reported that boys verbally abused girls in sexual terms:

Hills female Teacher

Put downs in terms of um, their appearance, um, in terms of their sexual behavior or perceived sexual behavior, er, in terms of, um, just sex words for girls ... Bitch and things like that.

Hyland female Teacher

The boys will call the girls names but it'll be straight out, you know, harassment, like you're flat chested or you've got big tits. ... Usually sexually oriented, so it might be slut or it might be something to do with their body shape—fat or big tits or no tits or something like that.

Unlike the girls and teachers, some boys reported that there was "not much" of such verbal behavior by them to girls, in accord with Owens' (1996) finding that boys report less boy-to-girl aggression than girls and teachers report. Some boys did admit to verbal sexual victimization, such as a Balton boy who reported, "A boy might go up to a girl and ask her if she's a virgin and stuff like that." The following interchange between the interviewer and a group of boys from Hills is illustrative:

I: What sorts of things would you pay a girl out with to do with sex?

B1: She never gets any.

B2: She gets too much.

B3: Or she sleeps around, you know!

Valley boy Group 2

... calls her walking hedgehog Mini-Me ... because she's so short.

Balton boys Group 1

A: Yeah, lots of guys make comments about girls—like she's fat, she's skinny—nice full breasts.

and

A: Sometimes I make a few jokes like, oh, "water-melons" or something.

D: Nice legs, nice arse.

B: Breasts [laughs]

I: In those very words?

All: Yes!

B: Crude words as possible.

They argued that when it did occur they were "only joking" and that the girls took it too seriously. However, the Hyland female teacher viewed such behavior as definitely not a tease:

It's being nasty. Horrible. And they'll always say I'm joking. But they're not. They're not joking.

Indirect Victimization

The third research question was whether material about indirect victimization of a sexual nature would be yielded. As we noted earlier, while high school girls engage in indirectly aggressive behavior more than boys, boys also engage in this type of behavior, especially towards girls (Russell and Owens 1999), yet little is known about this. The present study provided evidence about the nature of this behavior, as exemplified below.

Balton girl Group 2

...one of these guys started calling us lesbians. And started spreading it around to his group of friends, and every time they see us they'd be like 'Lezzos!'

The above example illustrates an interweaving of indirect aggression in the form of rumor-mongering, with direct name-calling.

Balton girls Group 2

B: Guys spread their rumors like you wouldn't believe it.

D: It's their way of getting back at you.

C: They're drama queens, like big thingo, they like exaggerate a bit actually.

D: But they totally change the story.

C: Like something that happened at a party or something, they'll make it a huge thing, make it the girl's fault it happened.

Hyland girl Group 2

...this was the rumor ... that I let him finger me, and then lick me up and then everybody standing and staring... this is the rest of it... and I gave him a head on the stairs [on school premises]

Hyland girl Group 2

Yeah! It's just like guys trying to top stories by other guys about girls, and sometimes that gets around.

Further examples of indirect victimization reported by the girls were the passing around of sexual notes and pornographic pictures. Despite the girls' vivid descriptions of such behaviors, boys generally denied being involved in indirect victimization of girls:

Hyland boy Group 1

...guys do it to girls? Never!

Some did admit it, the following comment again suggesting boys' perception of these incidents as amusing:

Hills boy

Then everyone throughout the school just earmarked her as a slut. And then they keep changing it around, and it gets worse and worse. Yeah, and it's funny.

In keeping with the notion that indirect aggression is intended to be covert, the teachers were uncertain about the extent to which the boys were involved in spreading rumors about girls. One teacher specifically referred to boys' harassment of girls as being "straight out, not clever, not manipulative"—presumably by contrast with a perception of girls as the socially manipulative ones. Teachers' awareness seemed to be related to their role in the school—for example, student counselors appeared more aware of this type of behavior than other teachers. The sort of evidence that did come to teachers' attention was drawings of genitals on desks with students' names attached.

In connection with rumor-mongering, an awareness of sexual double-standards was revealed by the girls:

Hyland girls Group 2

F: See when, like, when guys go and, like, do stuff with, like, three different girls the same night, but if girls would do it—like slut. If girls did, they'd be called like...

I: So for girls they're sluts, if boys do it they're fantastic.

F: Oh well done.

A teacher also commented on this:

Hills female Teacher 1

... double standards really, um, apply so that, um, the boys are allowed to be sexually active and the girls aren't.

Effects on girls

The fourth research question concerned the effects of the boys' behaviors on the girls. Harmful effects of sexual victimization were described by the girls, teachers and boys, though some girls were seen as more able to deal with it than others.

Hyland male Teacher 3

Girls have gone to single sex schools because they've found some of their behaviors were interpreted at the mixed school in certain ways ... well then there's harassment, and that's when it can become quite devastating for some kids.

Hills female Teacher 1

...most girls feel very hurt. They're very sensitive about themselves as sexual.

and

...one of the students in the class, one of the boys, made a comment about her being fat and put it on the computer screen in the computing room. Um, and so she, you know, that triggered off her, was a trigger, not the total reason I think, for her anorexia.

Balton male Teacher 1

Well, it would certainly do a lot of wrecking of self-esteem. And then of course what you see is the possibility of eating disorders.

Balton girls Group 2

D: Some go off and cry.

E: Some just shrug it off.

Valley girls

A: It makes you all upset and makes you not want to come to school.

and

B: Yes, when people call me fat, I just want to like lose weight.

A: I want to stick my fingers down my throat or something, which I started doing for a while.

The Hills girls reported feeling intimidated by the boys' verbal abuse such that they were afraid to walk across the quadrangle alone in case something was said to them.

By contrast with girls' and teachers' reports, one boy believed the girls were unaffected by such behaviors, while another thought their responses varied:

Hills boy

Most of the time they're so up themselves they couldn't care what you're saying.

Balton boy Group 1

Depends on the girl.

However, in general the boys recognized that girls were often very hurt:

Balton boys Group 1

Could deep...could scar someone. And they will take those problems through all right, through all their life or something.

Hyland boys Group 2

G: Mental instability.

I: So what do you mean? Has a lasting effect?

A: If like, there's a girl that keeps getting paid out because she's like fat and ugly and intelligent and stuff, then she could become sort of disturbed mentally.

B: Suicidal, yes.

Hyland boy Group 1

You know that they'll take it to heart.

Valley boy Group 2

Some people just move schools.

Valley boys Group 2

A: Depression. Everyone gets...

E: and no one cares.

The boys claimed that the girls took nasty comments too seriously, and were more sensitive than boys:

Hyland boy Group 1

"You're ugly, you're like [Austin?] Powers" or something and yeah, "Go and look at your face." It's like, they take it all offensive.

Hyland boy Group 2

...they just, like, call the girls names... Some girls might take it seriously.

Hyland boy Group 1

You know that they'll take it to heart.

Balton boys Group 1

F: Guys don't take it to heart though.

B: Guys get that kind of crap all day.

One group of girls agreed that girls are more sensitive than boys to this kind of victimization:

Balton girls Group1

A: The guys don't really care... that much.

B: It's just sort of like who gives?

While, with reference to girls,

E: They care about more what people think I reckon.

One boy put forward a theory about this:

Balton boy Group 1

It doesn't happen to girls as often. Guys are kind of, it's like having an injection you know, you have an injection, you put a bit of the stuff in so it makes you kind of immune. Guys get that kind of stuff every day.

Other boys, and one male teacher, suggested that the behaviors resulted from boys' natural "horniness":

Hills boy

It's just the way the world works.

Balton male Teacher

It's all sex and natural.

A sense of being unable to win was explicitly reported by one girl:

Valley girl

If you're heaps skinny though you're still going to get picked on because you're flat chested. So you can't win!

This inability to win was also implicit in the data from all types of participants. Girls were reported to be victimized for having large or small breasts, for reputedly sleeping around too much or not enough, for either waxing their legs or for having hairy legs, for being too tall or too short.

Girls' Responses/Retaliation

The final research question was how girls respond to the behaviors in question. Some girls reported that the best policy to prevent further victimization was not to react.

Valley girls

C: You can't let guys know that they're getting to you because...

D: They'll keep doing it.

B: They get so much more pleasure in it.

More assertive responses were also in evidence. Most victimization of boys by girls was seen as a matter of retaliation or revenge and, in contrast to the lack of physical attacks on girls by boys, this retaliation sometimes took a physical form. One teacher recognized a range of responses by girls, including yelling, hitting and telling teachers. This teacher implied that physical retaliation was a successful strategy for the girls:

Hyland female Teacher 4

...the girls who yell back and maybe give them a punch on the arm or something. They often don't get harassed again.

Hyland boy Group 2

Because I reckon they can slap you, but you can't do anything, but then you'd be called a girl

basher...

Hills boys

E: Girls can hit us...but...

D: You can't do anything about it.

Hyland boys Group 2

C: ...they just, like, call the girls names... Some girls might take it seriously.

E: You know, that's when they start slapping and stuff.

and

I: What do the girls do back to the boys the most?

A: Kick!

B: Slap!

Verbal retaliation was also reported, taking the form of comments that cast aspersions on a boy's masculinity:

Balton girls Group 2

E: I just turned around to him and I go, "Well the only reason I'm angry at you SS is that I am jealous that your boobs are bigger than mine." He shut up after that.

and

A: ...I'd turn around and yell. "X's got a small dick" all the way down the corridor...

C: Usually in retaliation.

A: He deserved it, he deserved worse than that.

Valley girl

...just saying, you have a pin dick

Balton girl Group 1

...if someone abuses one of my friends I'll go and abuse the guy!

Teachers had some awareness of this kind of behavior, which was disapproved of by one teacher, who interpreted it as banter:

Balton female Teacher 2

There's probably a fair bit of bantering that way too. Ah ha. Somebody the other day called somebody a needle dick or something. OK I know. And it was in conjunction with somebody who said something, must have been an insult or something. So she come, came back with that... But on the whole I'm not aware of all that much. Because usually if I hear anything like that I would jump on it immediately. And stop it.

Finally, girls' social influence was used:

Balton girls Group 2

C: We give it back as good as we get ... I spread a rumor about to stick up for one of my friends.

D: Usually it's just sort of revenge.

Often, then, girls' retaliation is on behalf of their friends. The social power of the girls was recognized by the boys:

Balton boys Group1

B: They're good at luring people away, yes they can do that.... Girls can make like other guys do things because of their popularity.

A: Because they can't really rough you up or anything.

I: They use their influence.

A: Use their mental power!

Discussion

This study found victimization of girls by high school boys to be an everyday occurrence. In answer to our main research question, despite the fact that the term sexual harassment was not mentioned in the study description nor raised by the interviewer, the behaviors described by participants were overwhelmingly sexual in nature, taking the form of verbal and indirect, rather than physical victimization. Sexualized examples, concerning appearance and sexual reputation, seemed to be the very "stuff" of girls' victimization by boys, and boys, girls and teachers agreed on this. As discussed further later, this does suggest that most aggression and bullying research has not sufficiently highlighted the essentially sexual nature of boys' victimization of adolescent girls.

The agreement of boys and girls that most physical cross-gender engagement in school is flirtatious and light-hearted is in accord with the notion of "pushing and poking courting" among adolescents reported in North American studies (e.g., McMaster et al. 2002). (Note that in Australia "poking" is a colloquialism for sexual intercourse and so carries a different meaning from that intended by US/Canadian writers.) One teacher saw girls as the instigators of such physical events, with boys only acting in retaliation, in accord with reports from the UK and Canada that teachers often blame sexual harassment on girls (Berman et al. 2000; Chambers et al. 2004; Duncan 1999). However, this was the only such comment by a teacher, and girls were not generally seen by boys or girls as the instigators of non-physical sexual victimization. On the whole, it seems that physical victimization of girls by boys in these Australian middle-class schools, whether sexual or not, happens relatively rarely. There were no reports of violent physical assaults as reported by Duncan (1999) in the UK, although even there Duncan found the idea that boys mainly exert their dominance through physical force to be "nonsense" (p. 130). It also seems unlikely that the observational methods used in Pellegrini's (2001) US study to measure (overt, mainly physical) sexual harassment would yield much data in these Australian schools.

By contrast, numerous examples of verbal victimization were provided by the girls, in accord with previous findings that verbal insults are commonplace in schools (e.g., Crick et al. 1996). We also found plenty of evidence for boys' indirectly aggressive behavior towards girls, taking the form of rumor-mongering about girls' sexual reputations. The suggestion of one girl that this behavior can result from boys' attempts to top one another's stories suggests that girls fall victim to sexual rumor as part of boys' intragender competition for dominance, in the same way as described by Duncan (1999) in British schools.

Our findings echo in an Australian context Duncan's (1999) work revealing endemic sexual victimization of girls by boys in UK schools, and Timmerman's (2003) finding of school-based sexual harassment as pervasive in her Netherlands study. As Timmerman found, it seemed to be largely a public phenomenon, occurring in the presence of others and in public spaces, such as quadrangles and classrooms, supporting her notion that it is a broad cultural phenomenon rather than the occasional covert display of aberrant behaviors.

Tulloch (1995) suggested that behaviors girls view as bullying, boys may regard as "harmless fun." Duncan (1999) too, in the British context, spoke of boys as having a laugh in terms of sexual victimization of girls. Boys in the present study clearly recognized that the behaviors could cause harm, but nevertheless saw them as a joke. However, the description by the girls of boys shouting sexual comments right in their faces, and by the boys of deliberately choosing crude words, certainly does not sound like a joke, and one teacher commented that these behaviors are definitely not light-hearted teasing. Such indications of intentionality to harm on the part of the boys would bring such sexually harassing behaviors under the broad definitional umbrella of aggression. Furthermore, if we assume that the boys have power over the girls (whether because of their size, because of being in a group or through the culturally derived power of being male), then such behaviors also fit definitions of bullying, especially if, as seems the case, these behaviors are not occasional, but repeated. As such, the term "sexual bullying" seems appropriate to apply to boy-girl victimization in high school (Duncan 1999).

While the boys recognized (and indeed, anticipated—"You know they'll take it to heart") the harm these behaviors might inflict upon girls, they continued to engage in the behaviors, found them fun, and did not express any concern about this situation. The comment by one boy

that "Some people just move schools" suggests that this effect is seen as a minor consequence. The boys thus appear to lack empathy for the girls' plight. As Duncan (1999) commented, "In the case of sexualized attacks ... empathy is less likely to be forthcoming if the peer group's construction of girls is founded upon a concept of otherness." (p. 59). This issue can perhaps be considered in the light of social identity theory, which posits that individuals favor members of their own group over out-group members in order to preserve self-esteem (Hogg and Abrams 1988): the perceived harmfulness of deprecating speech is influenced by in-group and out-group membership (Leets and Giles 1997). In the present study, while boys do recognize the harmfulness of their behaviors to girls (at least, cognitively), they nevertheless have strategies for preserving their self-esteem: first, they minimize the harmful intentions of their in-group by claiming that the boys only mean it in fun; and second, they suggest that the out-group is to blame—the girls take it too seriously.

The theory proposed by one boy that boys become immune to victimization directly supports the suggestion by McMaster et al. (2002) that boys may become desensitized to sexual harassment. He was suggesting that the general culture of put-downs among boys means they are used to it and therefore better able to take it. However, given the pervasiveness of sexual victimization of girls in coeducational high schools noted in this study and others, this does beg the question as to why the girls do not become similarly immune. This is presumably because the boys choose to victimize girls in ways that are especially important to them in the developmental stage of adolescence—their sexual reputation and body image. However, our evidence indicated that boys are not entirely immune to retaliatory sexualized attacks from girls.

While the more extreme kinds of sexualized violence revealed by Duncan's (1999) work were not mentioned in this study (and, through the rumor-mill, the students would surely have been aware of such incidents), there was a great deal of what he described as "noxious" if ".... less dramatic practices that mark the boundaries of gendered power domains" (p.128). If, as Duncan maintains, such behaviors by boys serve the purpose of providing reminders that relationships are structured by power, which is gendered, this makes sense of the fact that girls seemingly cannot win. The point is that, according to the sociocultural theory of sexual bullying as posited by Duncan, they are never intended to win.

This is not to say that the girls are completely powerless in the face of sexual bullying, as responses to our final research question revealed. Some retaliate physically, and it appears that the social sanction against boys physically attacking girls does not apply in reverse. It is of interest that some recent studies have demonstrated that, in response to conflicts with both male and female peers, girls display more overt anger than boys, in contrast to gender stereotypical assumptions (Owens et al. 2005a, b; Shute and Charlton 2006), and it has been suggested that changing gender roles are allowing girls to display these behaviors towards boys while the boys remain constrained by the notion of chivalry (Shute and Charlton 2006). Some girls' retaliatory strategy of casting aspersions on boys' masculinity was seen as effective by the boys, as was girls' social power in luring away friends. This accords with Duncan's (1999) finding, with reference to girls' role as romance-brokers, that even within a system in which boys dominate, "...many girls win their own space in which to wield socio-cultural power" (p. 129).

In contrast to a Canadian study where girls felt very strongly that their protestations about sexual victimization were silenced by teachers (Berman et al. 2000), there was only a little evidence of this in the present study, with one teacher mentioning that she would stop verbal retaliation by girls, and another regarding sexually victimizing behaviors by boys as natural. One teacher commented that physical retaliation was an effective strategy for the girls.

In terms of the study's limitations, it was based on focus groups and interviews within a largely middle-class context, and may therefore have been biased towards inclusion of more articulate and confident students. While it is possible that the use of a female interviewer may have affected the boys' responses in the direction of socially appropriate responding, they nevertheless provided much material about their own behaviors that would be censured by school authorities. While the principal coder was male, the team as a whole and those involved in the reliability checks were both male and female, which would act to counter any gender bias at the analysis stage.

Despite the study's limitations, and its short-term nature, the findings show many similarities to those from Duncan's much longer-term ethnographic work in the UK. As the present project was carried out by researchers from a different discipline background, in a different country, several years later and using a different methodology, this suggests that the basically sex-based nature of boys' victimization of girls in high schools is a robust phenomenon and not particular to the UK Midlands high schools that Duncan studied. As psychologists, we therefore uphold Duncan's sociological view that such bullying needs to be understood not just in terms of individual differences and pathologies (a traditional psychological view), but in terms of broader sociocultural issues. As Alloway (2000) has observed, denying the gendered nature of such behaviors permits adults to assume a political naivety

among school students that is misplaced even in the case of younger children. In this paper, we have highlighted that the essentially gendered nature of adolescent boys' victimization of girls is, in the main, invisible in the aggression and bullying research traditions. Very recently, Klein (2006) has similarly argued that "normalized masculinity" is an underlying, but unrecognized factor in not only sexual harassment in adolescents, but dating violence and school shootings in the USA, which she argues lie on "a continuum of unrecognized violence against young girls" (p. 147). On this view, understanding the sexual bullying of girls as described in our paper provides an essential foundation for prevention of not just everyday, but more extreme, forms of violence against young women.

Duncan (1999) views sexual bullying in terms of the important task of developing one's social identity in adolescence. He has speculated that macro-social changes in the UK working-class communities he studied, such as fragmentation of families and less certain occupational identities, resulted in a loss of traditional markers of identity, with sexual reputation and the body attaining greater significance and thus becoming targets in competition for social status at the micro-cultural level of the school. In the present study, we saw many similarities to Duncan's findings, but among middle-class students in suburban Australia, where the particular types of macro-social change identified by Duncan in the UK were probably not a factor. Future research could therefore usefully address the question of whether this focus on sexual reputation and the body amongst adolescents is in fact increasing, and if so, whether it reflects a more general western cultural trend, and under what macro-social influences. Also, as speculated in this paper, one way of examining the role of identity in adolescent sexual bullying might be through the application of social identity theory, and we currently have research under way in this regard. More generally, we suggest that researchers into aggression and bullying, with a main focus on individual characteristics, should nevertheless remain cognizant of the broader sociocultural contexts that permit such harmful behaviors to flourish.

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