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# Peer Sexual Harassment and Peer Violence Among Adolescents in Johannesburg and Chicago

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PEER SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND PEER VIOLENCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN  
JOHANNESBURG AND CHICAGO

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HEADER: TEEN PEER VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

PEER SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND PEER VIOLENCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN  
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ABSTRACT

In this comparison study of peer sexual harassment and peer violence in South African and US schools, the roles of gender and power in the experience, perpetration, and reaction to peer sexual harassment, physical violence and sexual violence are described for 208 South African students and 224 US students age 16-18.

PEER SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND PEER VIOLENCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN  
JOHANNESBURG AND CHICAGO

In the United States sexual harassment has been viewed from two perspectives. Sexual harassment has been defined as a sex discrimination issue that negatively affects women's employment and education, and as a sexual violence issue that threatens women's health and safety. Research conducted on sexual harassment at both the university and high school level identified the negative effects of sexual harassment and sexual violence that specifically inhibit girls' and women's access to an equal education. In 1995, a Human Rights Watch report concluded that "South African women, living in one of the most violent countries in the world, are disproportionately likely to be victims of that violence" (1995: 44). Our prior research examining sexual harassment, physical and sexual violence in the school environment initiated our interest in examining sexual harassment and peer violence in South African schools (Bennett and Fineran, 1998; Fineran and Bennett, 1999).

The advent of major social change in South Africa, affords an opportunity to compare students from this diverse culture with regard to their experience of peer sexual harassment and peer violence with a population of students from the United States. This report is based on data collected in a 1997 study of peer sexual harassment and peer violence among 208 Johannesburg-area high school students age 16 to 18, part of a larger 1997 study of peer sexual harassment and peer violence in South Africa. South African students are then compared to a sample of 220 U.S. high school students equivalent by gender, age and race.

The goals of this descriptive study are to (1) estimate the incidence of peer sexual harassment, severe physical violence and sexual assault between adolescent peers, (2) examine the role of gender and power in peer sexual harassment across cultures, (3) describe the type of relationship between victims and perpetrators and (4) describe the relationship between peer sexual harassment, severe physical violence, and sexual assault by adolescent peers.

To date, most research on children in South Africa has focused on the negative effects of community violence and school violence on child mental health. Research conducted on sexual harassment in South Africa has involved university students.

#### Sexual Harassment Research in South Africa

Studies documenting sexual harassment at several South African universities lend support to defining this issue as a problem for students (Braine, Bless and Fox, 1995; Gouws and Kritzinger, 1995; Mayekiso and 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. Gouws and Kritzinger (1995) found that female students who had been sexually assaulted experienced shame and stigmatization 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 favors in exchange for more favorable grades.

#### Peer Violence

Research on children and adolescents who are victims of peer violence is underdeveloped in South Africa (Ramphela, 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; Ramphela, 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.

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; Holdstock, 1991; McKendrick and Hoffman, 1991; Straker, 1992). Ramphela 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” (1997:1190). Our research in the United States lends support to the belief that schools are violent and that both the victimization of students by peers and perpetration of violence to peers is a significant problem (Bennett and Fineran, 1998; Fineran and Bennett, 1999).

#### U.S. Research On Sexual Harassment And Children

Research on sexual harassment among children has focused primarily on sexual harassment that occurs in junior high and high schools (Fineran and Bennett, 1998). In all, there have been 8 surveys conducted on adolescent sexual harassment (American Association of University Women (AAUW), 1993; Fineran and Bennett, 1999; Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW),

1995; Roscoe et al., 1994; Strauss and Espeland, 1992; Stein, et al., 1993; Stratton and Backes, 1997; Trigg and Wittenstrom, 1996).

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; Stratton and Backes, 1997; Trigg and Wittenstrom, 1996), two surveys also addressed the types of relationships that the students had with one another (PCSW, 1995; Fineran and Bennett, 1999) and Fineran and Bennett (1999) examined aspects of cultural and personal power in the perpetration and experience of sexual harassment and peer violence.

#### Variables: Gender, Power and Peer Relationship

Gender is a major descriptive variable 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 and peer violence, girls are found to be victimized more frequently than boys, while boys perpetrate sexual harassment and peer violence more frequently than girls (AAUW, 1993; PCSW, 1995). Research also supports that victimized girls are more threatened and upset by sexual harassment and peer violence than boys (AAUW, 1993; PCSW, 1995; Bennett and Fineran, 1998; Fineran and Bennett, 1999). Gender harassment and unwanted sexual touching are frequent complaints of female students regarding their peers and their view of the school environment.

In adult workplace and university studies of sexual harassment power and power differential have been found to be main components. Generally, 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). Our earlier research found that socially derived beliefs supporting male dominance were correlated with the perpetration of both sexual harassment and peer violence among high school students in Chicago (Fineran and Bennett, 1999; Bennett and Fineran, 1998).

The types of peer relationships students have in the school environment may determine how familiar students are with one another and affect their day to day interactions. Peer relationships include dating relationships, long-term friendships, school acquaintances and interactions with unknown students.

## METHODOLOGY

This study examines and compares the prevalence of peer sexual harassment, peer physical violence and peer sexual violence in a sample of South African and U.S. high school students. We expect to see a relationship between power, gender, and the experience and perpetration of peer sexual harassment, and peer physical and sexual violence in the South African population. Based on previous studies we hypothesize that students in South Africa will report being the victim of peer sexual harassment and physical and sexual violence, and that female students will experience a higher frequency of sexual harassment and sexual and physical violence victimization than boys. We also hypothesize that females will perceive this harassment and violence as more threatening than boys.

### Sample and Procedure

A nonprobability sample of 342 students in a Midwestern, urban U.S. high school answered questions about frequency of victimization, perpetration, and reaction to sexual harassment. Similarly, we also surveyed 261 students from four urban schools in a township outside of Johannesburg, South Africa. Because of a wide range of ages for students in both countries, the comparison study sample is limited to 16, 17 and 18 year olds ( $N_{US}=220$ ,  $N_{SA}=208$ ). Comparison of the demographic information for the U.S. and South Africa populations is arrayed in Table 1.

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Table 1 about here

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For purposes of the study, peer sexual harassment is defined as unwanted or unwelcome behaviors, 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 rumors; calling someone gay or lesbian in a malicious manner; 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 behavior other than kissing (American Association of University Women, 1993; Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, 1995; Fineran and Bennett, 1999). Physical violence is defined as being punched, kicked or beat and sexual violence included being pressured to do something sexual a student did not want to do, and or attempted rape or rape (Bennett and Fineran, 1998).

### Measures

*Peer sexual harassment.* One of the criterion variable for this report is frequency of peer sexual harassment during the past school year. This measure is the sum of 12 ordinal items on a 5-point scale (never to very frequently) taken from the literature and previously utilized with 463 U.S. high school students. Students estimated the frequency that they experienced the 12 behaviors during the school year. This index is marginally adequate (Chronbach's  $\alpha = 0.78$ ). Similarly, students indicated their perpetration of the same 12 behaviors towards classmates and these items are summed into a perpetration index for sexual harassment. The internal consistency of the perpetration scale is adequate (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ).

A sexual violence variable was created by summing two of the items in the sexual harassment scale which included: 1) being pressured to do something sexual a student did not want to do and 2) hurt in a sexual way (attempted rape or rape). These two items were also summed to indicate whether students had perpetrated these behaviors to other students. The frequency of physical violence was measured by a single item. Students indicated how frequently during the past school year they were punched kicked or beat or perpetrated these behaviors to other students. Similar to the other criterion variables, frequency choices were based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never to daily.

*Gender.* Students indicated their own gender and if victimized the gender of the person who victimized them. Students who perpetrated harassment or violence also reported the gender of the students whom they victimized.

*Power.* In this study, we focused on two dimensions of power: culturally based power based on beliefs about male dominance and personal power experienced as self confidence. The Heterosexual Relationships Scale (HRS: Hall, Howard and Boezio, 1986) quantifies the “belief that men should dominate women, perceptions of the opposite sex as sex objects, and views that sex involves conquest” (Hall, Howard and Boezio, 1986, p.108) and has the advantage of being normed on an adolescent population. The HRS is self administered and consists of 12 items on a 4-point scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Because of an unacceptably low coefficient alpha in the 12 item scale, five low-correlation scale items were removed resulting in a marginal alpha of .60.

A subscale of Bennett’s (1986) Index of Personal Reactions (IPR) was used to quantify personal power. The scale is self administered and consists of 10 items with a 5-point scale. The reliability of the IPR in this study is adequate (alpha = .77).

*Relationship.* In this study students identified who they were victimized by and who they victimized. It is important to note that students are potentially both victim and perpetrator. Relationships were limited to

school peers and students indicated the types of relationships between victim and perpetrator as 1) unknown schoolmate, 2) casually known schoolmate and 3) dating/ex-dating schoolmate.

## RESULTS

Results for the experience and perpetration of sexual harassment, physical violence and sexual violence in South African and U.S. student populations are shown in Figures 1 and 2 .

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Figures 1 and 2 about here

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Seventy-nine percent of South African and 83% U.S. students report experiencing sexual harassment by peers at school and 78% of South African and 74% of Americans report perpetrating sexual harassment to peers at school. Comparison analysis was conducted using the Mann-Whitney U. Results showed no significant difference for sexual harassment in either the perpetration or victimization of students between countries. For the remainder of the paper reported results of the Mann Whitney are significant unless otherwise noted.

Girls and boys from both countries had similar victimization and perpetration rates for sexual harassment. The mean victimization scores for girls in both South Africa and the U.S. were higher for sexual harassment than boys' scores but the Mann-Whitney U indicated that the difference between genders was not statistically significant.

Students in both settings answered questions about the sexual and physical violence they experienced from or perpetrated to schoolmates. Mann Whitney U results indicated no differences between South African and U.S. students in either the experience or perpetration of sexual violence, however the result for physical violence was quite different. South African students experienced and perpetrated more physical violence than their American counterparts.

When we examine gender differences for physical and sexual violence, boys in the U.S. experienced more physical violence than U.S. girls. Although girls in SA experienced more physical violence than SA boys the difference between genders was not significant. Boys in South Africa perpetrated more physical violence and sexual violence than South African girls. Similarly US boys perpetrated more physical violence and sexual violence than girls but the differences between US students were not significant.

#### *Power*

Mann-Whitney U results showed that US students who perpetrated sexual harassment had a higher endorsement of male social role power than South African students. For the personal power scale however, the reverse was true, South African students who perpetrated sexual harassment had higher scores than American students. Not surprisingly, boy perpetrators in both countries had higher endorsement of male social role power than girls and US girls who perpetrated sexual harassment also had higher endorsement of male social role power than South African girls. Boy perpetrators in both countries scored similarly on the male social role power scale.

In examining personal power, the data indicate that South African boys who perpetrated sexual harassment scored higher than US boys and, South African girls scored higher than the US girls. There were no differences by gender for students in each country.

#### *Peer Relationships*

Students were also asked about their peer relationships and whether they were victimized by or perpetrated sexual harassment to classmates they knew casually, classmates they have dated or who they are currently dating, or students who attend their school whom they don't know.

For South African students there are significant differences for perpetration to and victimization by peers they do not know. Girls in South Africa report experiencing more sexual harassment from peers they did not know and peers whom they had dated. The South African boys perpetrated more sexual

harassment towards a dating partner, while the U.S. students show no significant difference by peer relationship and gender for the victimization or perpetration of sexual harassment.

Students were also asked whether they were victimized by or perpetrated physical or sexual violence to classmates they knew casually, classmates they have dated or who they are currently dating, or students who attend their school whom they don't know. For South African students there are significant differences for victimization by peers whom they are dating. Girls in South Africa report experiencing more physical violence and sexual violence from peers whom they have dated or are currently dating. There were no significant gender differences for the perpetration of physical violence, however, South African boys perpetrated more sexual violence towards a casually known peer.

The U.S. students show no significant difference by peer relationship and gender for the victimization or perpetration of sexual violence. However, for the victimization and perpetration of physical violence U.S. boys perpetrated and experienced more physical violence than U.S. girls.

### *Reaction*

T-test results showed that girls in both countries are more threatened by sexual harassment and physical violence than boys. There were no gender differences found for U.S. students and their experience of sexual violence, however, South Africa girls were more threatened by sexual violence than boys.

## DISCUSSION

This preliminary study of peer sexual harassment and peer violence in South African schools shows a number of similarities with studies conducted in the United States. Gender issues appear to feature prominently in both victimization and perpetration of sexual harassment and physical violence. Girls in particular appear to be at risk and school administrators should be aware of safety concerns for both boys and girls within the school environment.

In terms of victimization, girls from both countries are more threatened or upset by sexual harassment and peer violence than boys, and the fact that these behaviors occur in school supports our understanding of schools as “hostile environments” and that girls in particular may be more negatively affected by the environment. Although boys in both countries perpetrated more sexual harassment than girls it is interesting to note the difference between boys’ scores on the two power scales. Boys in America scored significantly higher on the male social role scale, while boys in South Africa scored significantly higher on the self confidence scale. The difference may be attributable in part to cultural factors. South African students who have lived in a segregated society may draw more of their perceived power from their personal circumstances and themselves rather than from a society that has dismissed them. In this research, we link the frequency of peer sexual harassment and violent behavior to male power beliefs and to personal power beliefs. It is likely that sexual harassment creates and supports a hierarchy where boys and girls who identify with a culture supporting male dominance victimize peers more often.

When examining peer relationships and sexual harassment South African girls experienced more sexual harassment from peers they dated or schoolmates they did not know, where boys perpetrated more sexual harassment against peers they were dating or had dated. This is in contrast to the American students who had higher perpetration and victimization rates from their casually known schoolmates. This may indicate a difference in the school environment where sexual harassment is not normative to South African schools in the same way that it is in American schools. However, we found the incidence of physical violence experienced by students in South African schools to be surprisingly high. South African students experienced and perpetrated significantly more physical violence than their American counterparts. This finding might be related to the level of violence in South African children’s lives since the population of students came from a very poor township outside of Johannesburg. It may be that violence in South African schools is normative.

We believe that sexual harassment and peer violence are accepted as normative adolescent behavior and argue that this belief needs to be challenged by educators worldwide. The belief that sexual harassment and violence among high school peers is normal adolescent behavior ignores both the criminal aspects of these behaviors and the mental health effects of harassment and violence on victims. In particular, educators need to be aware that the number of victimized students affected by these behaviors expands enormously when we consider not only the student directly harassed but the many students who witness these daily traumatic events in the lives of their peers. The climate created by peer harassment and violence occurring within the school may indeed be viewed as a hostile environment by all students.

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**TABLE 1**

**HIGH SCHOOL SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS**

<b>United States Population</b>		<b>South Africa Population</b>	
<b>Number in Sample</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>Number in Sample</b>	<b>208</b>
<b>Mean Age</b>	<b>17.0</b>	<b>Mean Age</b>	<b>17.0</b>
<b>16</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>18</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Grade level</b>		<b>Grade level</b>	
<b>Freshman</b>	<b>2.3 %</b>	<b>Standard 9</b>	<b>50.0 %</b>
<b>Sophomore</b>	<b>15.5</b>	<b>matrec</b>	<b>50.0</b>
<b>Junior</b>	<b>36.4</b>		
<b>Senior</b>	<b>45.9</b>		
<b>Race / Culture</b>		<b>Race / Culture</b>	
<b>African American</b>	<b>44.2 %</b>	<b>African</b>	<b>33.2</b>
<b>Latino</b>	<b>25.9</b>	<b>Mixed Race</b>	<b>66.1</b>
<b>White</b>	<b>14.3</b>		
<b>Asian/Pacific Island</b>	<b>11.6</b>		
<b>Other</b>	<b>2.7</b>		
<b>Sex</b>		<b>Sex</b>	
<b>Girls</b>	<b>65 %</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>68 %</b>
<b>Boys</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>32</b>

Figure 1  
Frequency of Perpetration  
428 High School Students

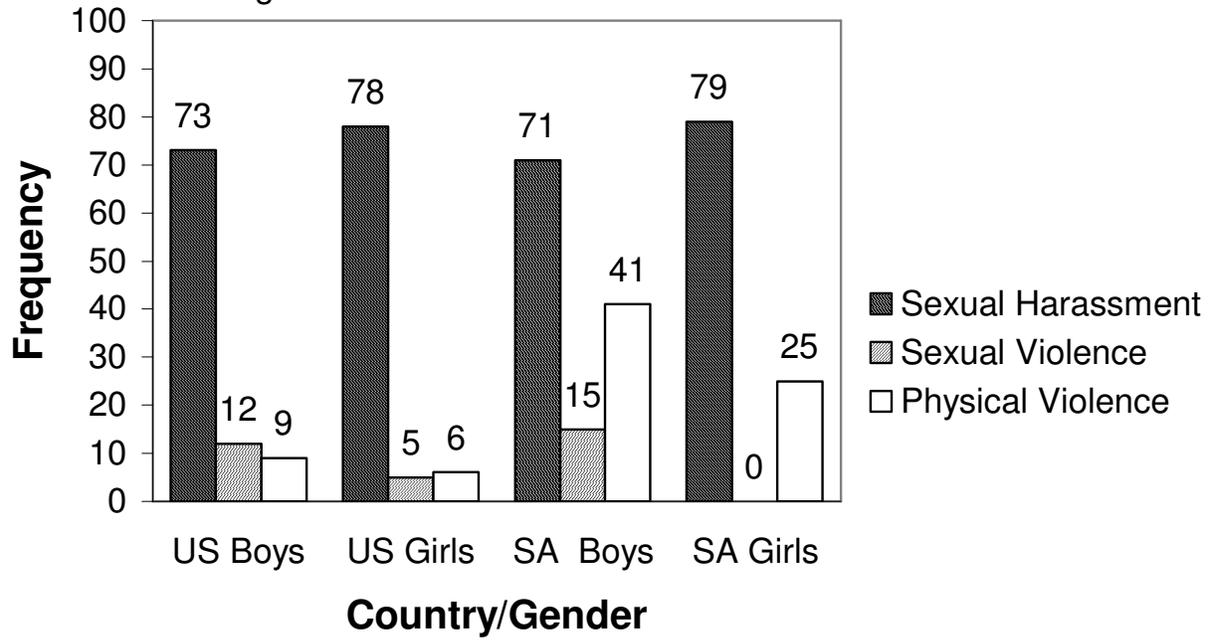


Figure 2  
Frequency of Victimization  
428 High School Students

