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ADOLESCENTS AT WORK:
GENDER ISSUES AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study describes adolescents' experience with sexual harassment while working part time and attending high school. In a sample of 712 high school students, 35% of the 332 students who work part-time report experiencing sexual harassment (63% girls; 37% boys). Results revealed that there are differences in the experience of sexual harassment by gender, work relationship and emotional reaction. Students experienced harassment from supervisors (19%), co-workers (61%) and unidentified others at work (18%). Girls reported being significantly more upset and threatened by the sexual harassment they experienced at work than boys.

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The transition from adolescence to adulthood is an important one. Exploring the intricacies of the workplace where a majority of students spend between 5 to 20 hours a week is important to our understanding of this critical time. Although, many students now choose to work while attending high school, no attention has been given to adolescents who experience workplace sexual harassment. Over the past 20 years, the effects of sexual harassment on mental and physical health has been documented for female adults who experience sexual harassment in the workplace, but not students who work part time. The next section outlines some of the findings regarding the effects of sexual harassment on mental and physical health. These results beg the question of whether students are affected similarly by negative work conditions and if so, how?

Sexual Harassment and Mental and Physical Health

Research findings support the negative effects of harassment and show that female victims of harassment experience a wide variety of symptoms that include decreased self-esteem and self-confidence, anger, irritability, social isolation, helplessness, anxiety, depression, tension and nervousness (Fitzgerald, 1993; Frazier & Cohen, 1992; Gruber & Bjorn, 1986; Gutek & Koss, 1993; Hamilton, Alagna, King, & Lloyd, 1987; Schneider, Swan & Fitzgerald, 1997; Terpstra & Baker, 1991), fear of rape (Holgate, 1989) and increased fear of crime in general (Junger, 1987). Gutek and Koss (1993) proposed a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder model for understanding the mental health consequences of sexual harassment for adults.

Somatic complaints related to sexual harassment victimization have also been documented. Crull (1982), in her sample of women seeking assistance from Working Woman

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Institute found that physical complaints were reported by 63% of the sample. Examples of somatic symptoms include: gastrointestinal disturbances, headaches, tiredness, dental-related problems, sleep disturbance, nausea, weight gain or loss of appetite (Dan, Pinsoff & Riggs, 1995; Gutek, 1985; Loy & Stewart, 1984; Salisbury et al., 1986). In addition to understanding sexual harassment as a mental and/or physical health issue it can also be viewed from a criminal perspective of sexual victimization.

Sexual Harassment and Sexual Victimization

In 1981 and 1987 the United States Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB, 1981, 1987) surveyed 23,964 federal employees and with a response rate of 83.8%, 42% of the women reported being the target of overt sexual harassment over a two-year period. In a general community study, Gutek (1985) reported that 53% of the women in a representative workforce sample had been harassed at least once. Incidents included insulting comments (19.8%), insulting looks and gestures (15.4%), and sexual touching (24.2%). She also found that nearly 1 in 12 (7.6%) had at some point been expected to participate in sexual activity as part of the job. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board survey also found that 52% of the women who experienced sexual harassment quit or were fired due to the harassment (USMSPB, 1981,1987). Fitzgerald (1993) observes that conservative estimates suggest that one of every two women will be harassed at some point during her academic or working life, indicating that sexual harassment is the most widespread of all forms of sexual victimization studied to date.

Sexual Harassment and Male Victimization

Sexual harassment law protects both males and females from discrimination and it has been estimated that the incidence of males experiencing workplace harassment ranges from 2%-15% (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; USMSPB, 1987). Research conducted by Berdahl, Magley &

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Waldo (1996) appears to substantiate the idea that adult men perceive sexual harassment very differently than the way women perceive it. In their study of 700 men and 475 women at a utility company, 14 % of the men reported having experienced sexual harassment as opposed to 68% of the women. Most men reported unwanted sexual attention as the most common type of harassing behavior. Gender harassment was listed as the second most frequent category, and was perceived as the negative stereotyping of men for deviating from masculine gender roles. The men in the study perceived both men and women as perpetrators of gender harassment. In general, the men did not seem to be threatened by sexually harassing behaviors and felt that they could easily stop or change the behaviors. The authors observe that “clearly these men do not expect to endure the levels of anxiety and loss of control that women report experiencing when sexually harassed” (Berdahl et al., 1996, p. 543). Adolescent boys’ experiences in the workplace may turn up different insights or confirm that what boys’ consider to be sexual harassment is different from girls’ experiences. There is little data available to confirm or refute the above mentioned gender differences regarding sexual harassment victimization for men at this time.

Overall, numerous studies illustrate that sexual harassment represents a serious risk to female adults’ psychological and physical well-being (Schneider et al., 1997). Since 80 to 90 percent of teens now report working during some part of high school it would seem important to describe their work experience and determine whether their experience with sexual harassment is similar to that described in the literature thus far. To date there is no information regarding the effects of sexual harassment on student mental or physical health or work performance, nor is there any information about whether school performance is affected by sexual harassment on the job.

Employed Adolescents and Sexual Harassment

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Prior studies of workplace sexual harassment have included information from 18 and 19 year olds, however, these teens are usually working full time as adults and no longer attending school. Only two very small studies have documented adolescent girls' workplace sexual harassment (Stein, 1981; Strauss & Espeland, 1992). Stein's (1981) seminal survey of a Massachusetts vocational high school (22 female students) documented girls' experience with sexual harassment at work. Eight students reported experiencing workplace sexual harassment that occurred while employed as babysitters, store clerks, or wait staff. Harassers were reported to be employers, customers, managers and co-workers. All of the students eventually quit because of the harassment or were fired from their jobs for non-compliance. Another survey conducted by Strauss and Espeland (1992) found that out of 250 female vocational students surveyed from four Minnesota school districts, 30% stated they had been sexually harassed at work.

Similar to adults, working adolescents are protected from discrimination by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Briefly, Title VII provides the main framework prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, and sex. In 1980 The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) issued a definition of sexual harassment, including specific guidelines to prohibit it. These guidelines define sexual harassment as,

“unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a nature that constitutes harassment when: 1) submission to the conduct is either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment; 2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting that individual; and/or 3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably

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interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment” (C.F.R. § 1604.11).

Adolescent Employment and School

The number of American teenagers who work has risen steadily since the 1960's. It is currently estimated that about 44% of 16 and 17 year olds work at jobs while attending high school. Overall, 80 to 90% of teens work at some point during high school and in 1996 for the first time more females were likely to be employed than males: 35.7 % for 16-17 year old females and 33.3% for 16 –17 year old males (The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 1998). With the rising number of employed teens, concern regarding sexual victimization at work, particularly for adolescent girls, seems merited.

Although there exists a body of knowledge describing teens' experience with work and school, definitive positions on whether work is detrimental to adolescents' education remains unclear. Critics of adolescent work say that it replaces the importance of academic performance with boring, entry level skills that do not transfer to the adult labor market after a student graduates (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986 ; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; Mortimor & Finch, 1986), while others argue that adolescent employment contributes to self-reliance, builds character, and integrates adolescents more smoothly into the adult work world (Barling, Rogers & Kelloway, 1995; Hamilton & Crouter, 1980; Wildavsky, 1989).

Although there are opposing viewpoints from adults on the worth of adolescent employment it appears that the majority of American teens have made a decision to work while attending school. This fact presses us to find out more about their young work lives. Previous research has described the types of jobs adolescents hold, the number of hours they work, and

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their earned wages however, the exact nature of adolescents' work experience with regard to sexual harassment and subsequent effects has not been explored. Of particular interest, are the relationships that teens have with their supervisors, co-workers and other work related persons (ie. customers, vendors, etc.), the gender of the harassers, how frequently harassment occurs and the effect harassment may have on student mental and physical health and academic school performance.

This seminal and descriptive investigation regarding working teens is part of a larger study that was conducted on the peer sexual harassment that occurs between high school students during the school day. The data for the study was collected in 1999. The information obtained from this smaller sub-sample of working teens furnishes a preliminary description of their experience with workplace sexual harassment and provides direction for future inquiry. This research explores workplace sexual harassment from the viewpoint of students who work while attending high school and compares male and female students who have experienced sexual harassment at their jobs.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Procedure

In a study focusing on sexual harassment that occurs between peers during the school day, students were asked to answer eleven additional questions inquiring about their on- the- job experience with sexual harassment. A non-probability sample of 712 Massachusetts students in a large suburban/rural high school completed a voluntary survey during health classes. In addition to questions regarding their experience of being sexually harassed by peers at school, students were asked about: 1) frequency of victimization at work, 2) emotional reaction to the sexual

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harassment, 3) the relationship between themselves and the perpetrator (supervisor, co-worker and other persons at work) and 4) the perpetrator's gender.

When asked whether or not they work outside of school, students were given the answer choices of "full-time", "part-time" and "don't work." Not surprisingly, very few students reported that they work full-time (1.6%, 11 students, N=705). Over half of the students, however, reported that they work part-time (54 %, 381 students); nearly as many reported that they don't work at all (44 %, 313 students).

The general school population from which the sub-sample of working students was taken was located in a suburban/rural area of western Massachusetts where the majority of students (91.3%) reported being White. Demographic information specific to the students who worked and students who experienced sexual harassment is located in Table 1.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Demographics of the racial groups of the students who worked were: 92.5% White (357 students), 3.4 % Latino (13 students), 0.3% African American (1 student), 1.6% Asian/Pacific Islander (6 students) and 2.3 % identified as other (9 students). Seven students (1.8 %) did not identify their race. The range of ages in the sample of working students was 14 to 19 with a mean age of 16.3; 56.7% identified as female. Most of the students were in the lower grades comprising nearly two thirds of the sample; 59 freshman (15 %); 180 sophomores (45.8%). Juniors and seniors were evenly split with 77 (19.6%) and 76 (19.3%) students respectively. Students estimated their grade point average based on a 7 point scale ranging from A's, to mostly D's and F's and 62% described themselves as "A" or "B" students.

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Measures

The questionnaire listed eight behaviors that were identified in prior sexual harassment studies on adolescents within schools (AAUW, 1993, 2001; Fineran & Bennett, 1999; PCSW, 1995; Stein et al., 1993) and asked students to indicate whether they had experienced a particular behavior at work (Yes/No). The questions inquired about typical sexual harassment behaviors and were arranged from the least intrusive, non-physical behaviors to those most physically intrusive; 1) called sexually offensive names; 2) made negative comments about my body/weight/clothing; 3) told sexually offensive jokes to me or about me; 4) showed, gave or left me sexually offensive pictures or messages; 5) grabbed me or pulled at my clothing in a sexual way; 6) pressured me for a date; 7) pressured me to do something sexual I did not want to do; 8) attempted to hurt me in a sexual way (attempted rape or rape). Students estimated the frequency with which they experienced sexual harassment at work over the past year on a 5-point scale ranging from never, once or twice per year, a few times per month, every few days, and daily. To describe the experience of sexual harassment students indicated the gender of the perpetrator, their relationship to the perpetrator and how threatened or upset they felt by the harassment. Relationship choices were: (1) supervisor, (2) co-worker and (3) other.

The threat/upset variable was rated on a 4-point ordinal scale ranging from not at all, very little, somewhat and very upsetting or threatening. Students indicated their own gender and the gender of the perpetrator for each of the three relationship choices.

RESULTS

Overall, 35% of the 393 working students reported experiencing sexual harassment on the job (63% female; 37% male N=137). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine whether the age of students affected the experience of sexual harassment

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victimization. Students who worked and experienced sexual harassment were significantly older than the students who worked and did not experience sexual harassment ($F=5.59$, $p<.01$). Grade point averages of teens who were employed and who experienced sexual harassment were compared with those teens who worked but were not harassed. ANOVA results show no significant grade point difference between the two groups. ANOVA results also do not reflect significant differences regarding grade point average by gender and sexual harassment victimization.

Male and female students experienced similar behaviors at work as shown in Table 2, and ANOVA indicated that the frequency of victimization for both genders was comparable.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Students were asked from whom they experienced sexual harassment; 19% identified supervisors, 61% identified co-workers and 18% reported unidentified others. Chi square results reveal that there are significant gender differences in the experience of sexual harassment by work relationship (See Table 3). In all three of the relationship categories males are more likely to be the harassers of females, while boys experience sexual harassment from both genders.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Results also show gender differences for students' emotional reaction to sexual harassment victimization. When examining how threatened or upset girls and boys were by victimization at work, ANOVA results indicate that girls were significantly more upset and

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threatened by the sexual harassment they experienced at work than boys were ($F = 24.7, p < .01$). When comparing the mean score of how threatened or upset girls were according to their relationship to the perpetrator, girls were most upset and threatened by “others.” Girls found supervisors to be less threatening than “others” but more threatening than co-workers. For boys, supervisors were the most threatening followed by co-workers and the least threatening relationship was with “others.”

DISCUSSION

This study provides a preliminary examination of sexual harassment for teens who work and attend school. Perhaps the most disturbing finding of this study is that 35% of the employed youths attending high school experienced sexual harassment on the job. The fact that a majority of American adolescents work while attending school increases the need for further investigation, and based on an increasing number of adolescent girls in the workforce, it is imperative to consider gender issues since girls may be at higher risk for experiencing sexual violence.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health estimates that 210,000 youths are injured at work each year (NIOSH, 1998). These statistics reflect occupational hazards and not injuries related to sexual harassment or sexual assault. As Fitzgerald (1993) noted, sexual harassment is easily aligned with sexual violence in our society where 50% of women report experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace and a number of these experiences are either attempted or completed sexual assaults. Ensuring that adolescents are protected and that companies pay closer attention to students' work environment are two areas requiring further investigation. In addition to concern over teens' safety at work, the development of a literature regarding sexual harassment and violence experienced by youths at work would provide

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important information to the already uneasy debate regarding the benefit to teens of working while in school.

Results from this study indicated that a student's age appeared to be a risk factor for sexual harassment. We might expect that more older students are working or that older students have been in the workforce longer than younger students, thus increasing their chances of experiencing sexual harassment. However, there is little information regarding the types of jobs older students might be eligible for and whether certain types of jobs would increase exposure to sexual harassment.

The degree of sexual maturity may also be a contributing factor to sexual harassment. Craig et al. (2001) found among peers at school that early-maturing adolescents were at increased risk for experiencing sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is usually understood as an abuse of power, however some theorists have noted biological considerations such as sexual attraction between the sexes (Tangri, Burt & Johnson, 1982), or certain types of work (Gutek, 1985) to be contributing factors.

In this study the experience of workplace sexual harassment was not correlated with grade point average however, further exploration of the effect of sexual harassment on adolescents' work/school experience would be helpful. Studies examining the long term consequences sexual harassment might have on both work and academic performance and future achievement in these areas are also indicated.

Similar to the adult literature on workplace sexual harassment, this study reflected girls' more frequent experience with sexual harassment than boys. However, the data from this high school study does reflect a higher number of boys reporting sexual harassment victimization than evidenced by earlier studies on male victimization in universities or the workplace. Prior

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incidence of males experiencing workplace harassment ranges from 2%-15% (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; USMSPB, 1987). This higher rate of victimization reported by boys needs further exploration, particularly in light of research conducted by Berdahl, Magley and Waldo (1996). Their study substantiates the idea that adult men perceive sexual harassment very differently than the way women perceive it. Regardless of gender differences, it appears that both male and female students are dealing with a range of behaviors that are very disturbing and clearly all students deserve a work experience that is a safe and productive one.

The finding that girls were significantly more upset and threatened than boys by the sexual harassment they experienced at work speaks to the need for further exploration regarding mental and physical health outcomes. Students who are feeling threatened and upset by behaviors they experience from supervisors, co-workers, or others at work are not likely to be functioning at an optimal learning level either at work or at school, and impaired health and lowered academic performance may impact a student's functioning into adulthood. Results from adult studies indicate that sexual harassment victimization does have a negative effect on mental and physical health and work performance. Whether adolescents, who may have a more transient work pattern, are impacted similarly is unknown.

The gender difference regarding who students were most threatened or upset by is intriguing. Girls were most threatened or upset by others at work and boys by supervisors. Gender harassment that women tend to experience in society may explain girls' observation of threat and upset from people other than supervisors and co-workers. Boys' reaction to supervisors on the other hand may be in response to the power hierarchy inherent at work.

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Study Limitations

The primary limitation of the study is the use of a nonprobability sample which limits the generalizability of the findings, and the sample population is not racially or economically diverse. Further exploration is needed on at risk populations such as students with disabilities or sexual minority youth and their experiences with sexual harassment and work. Due to the length of the survey developed for the larger study on peer sexual harassment in school, questions about teens' work related sexual harassment were very brief and modeled on adolescent's experience with school sexual harassment. Modification of adult workplace questionnaires (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Lee & Heppner, 1991; Hudson & Decker, 1994) may be useful in exploring this issue more thoroughly.

Implications for School Personnel

A detailed study of sexual harassment of working students in high school may help administrators, teachers and school personnel understand how sexism and job discrimination affect student self esteem, identity formation and school performance. It would also seem important to address this type of discrimination in the school environment where understanding and learning respect for one's peers is still a part of the adolescent school experience and there is opportunity for school personnel to question and explore a child's negative work experiences. In addition, integrating sexual harassment information with teen work safety issues is a positive way to help teens protect themselves and become more aware of sex discrimination issues. A resource for students and adults can be found at the Department of Labor. Their website: <http://www.dol.gov/dol/teensafety.htm> provides access to promotional materials, posters and legal information regarding the rights of working teens.

Conclusion

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The high school years are key to the social and emotional development of both boys and girls. It has been argued that adolescent employment provides lessons about responsibility, punctuality, interacting with the public, and finances (Moskowitz, 2000), however, the effects of sexual harassment experienced during a first job may also contribute negatively to a child's self-esteem and identity formation in addition to placing them in physical danger of assault and trauma. Although both girls and boys may be at risk for experiencing emotional and physical harm in the workplace, these issues may be particularly salient to girls' experience. Early employment experiences of sexual harassment may damage girls' self-esteem and create impediments to future career goals and achievements in the adult workplace where women's physical and emotional well-being and expected level of income is already compromised. Further examination of the experience of adolescents at work is needed to identify specific risk factors and develop recommendations to make teens' work environments safe from sexual harassment and sexual assault.

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TABLE 1
Demographic Information

Students Who Work and Did Not Experience Sexual Harassment		Students Who Work and Experienced Sexual Harassment	
Number in Sample	253	Number in Sample	137
Mean Age	16.1	Mean Age	16.6
Grade Point Average	2.7	Grade Point Average	2.8
Grade		Grade	
Freshman	17.8 %	Freshman	10.2 %
Sophomore	47.4	Sophomore	41.6
Junior	20.2	Junior	19.0
Senior	14.2	Senior	29.2
Race / Culture		Race / Culture	
African American	0.0 %	African American	.7 %
Latino	3.2	Latino	3.7
White	94.8	White	88.1
Asian/Pacific Island	1.2	Asian/Pacific Island	2.2
Other	0.8	Other	5.2
Sex		Sex	
Female	53 %	Female	63 %
Male	47	Male	37

N=393 high school students who work

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TABLE 2
PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT EXPERIENCE BY GENDER FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO WORK AND EXPERIENCED SEXUAL HARASSMENT

	OVERALL PREVALENCE EXPERIENCE (%)	GENDER PREVALENCE: EXPERIENCE (%)	
		Boys	Girls
Called sexually offensive names	41	39	42
Made negative comments about my body/weight/clothing	34	32	35
Told sexually offensive jokes to me or about me	67	66	68
Showed, gave or left me sexually offensive pictures, messages	18	20	17
Grabbed me or pulled at my clothing in a sexual way	43	49	39
Pressured me for a date	36	39	35
Pressured me to do something sexual I did not want to do	7	4	10
Attempted to hurt me in a sexual way (attempted rape or rape)	2	2	2

N=137 students

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TABLE 3
Frequency Of Sexual Harassment Experience By Gender And Perpetrator

	Overall Prevalence Experience (%)	Gender Prevalence: Perpetration (%)		Chi Square X ²
		Male	Female	
Supervisor	19	85	15	12.50**
Co-Worker	61	65	35	7.53**
Other	18	76	24	6.76**

N=137 students

** =p<.01

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