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## A longitudinal investigation of peer sexual harassment victimization in adolescence

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### Abstract

The current study describes longitudinal trends in sexual harassment by adolescent peers and highlights gender, pubertal status, attractiveness, and power as predictors of harassment victimization. At the end of 5th, 7th, and 9th grades, 242 adolescents completed questionnaires about sexual harassment victimization, pubertal status, and perceived power. Results indicate an increase in sexual harassment from 5th to 9th grade, with boys more likely to report harassment than girls in each grade. An analysis of harassment type indicated no gender difference in 9th grade cross-gender harassment, but boys received more same-gender harassment than girls. Pubertal status predicted concurrent sexual harassment victimization in each grade. Boys and girls with advanced pubertal status at all grades were more likely to be victims of 9th grade same-gender harassment. Adolescents with greater power at all grades were more likely to be victims of 9th grade cross-gender sexual harassment.

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Peer sexual harassment victimization (PSHV) has become a persistent problem in schools (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2001). As many as 81% of students between grades 8 and 11 have experienced some form of PSHV in their school lives (AAUW, 2001). Despite the prevalence of PSHV and its obvious importance, research has lagged behind. The current study expanded on existing research by describing longitudinal change in PSHV

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between 5th, 7th, and 9th grades and by examining concurrent predictors of PSHV in each grade. The current study also distinguished between same-gender and cross-gender harassment victimization in 9th grade in order to determine whether patterns of harassment are different when victimization occurs within or across genders.

The American Association of University Women defined peer sexual harassment as any “unwanted or unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with one’s life” (AAUW, 2001). They identified several behaviors that constitute peer sexual harassment victimization, which include both verbal and physical actions, such as being called gay or lesbian, or having clothes pulled off or down. The current study adopted this operational definition to identify patterns of sexual harassment victimization in adolescence.

### **Developmental patterns**

Students report sexual harassment victimization at a very early age, with 38% of high school students reporting that they were sexually harassed before sixth grade (AAUW, 2001). Alarmingly, victimization increases throughout middle school and into high school (Craig, Pepler, Connolly, & Henderson, 2001; Goldstein, Malanchuk, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2007; McMasters, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Pelligrini, 2001). As adolescents begin to experience the changes of pubertal development they have an increased interest in sexuality. This interest, paired with an immature ability to express romantic attraction, may spur an increase in sexually harassing behaviors (Pelligrini, 2001).

Despite the importance of studying the development of PSHV, few studies have examined developmental patterns of PSHV using a longitudinal approach (for exceptions see Goldstein et al., 2007; Pelligrini, 2001). The current study captured a time of rapid developmental change by examining trends in PSHV between 5th, 7th, and 9th grades. We predicted that peer sexual harassment victimization would increase across time from 5th to 9th grade.

### **Predictors of PSHV**

Based on previous research and theory we proposed that gender, pubertal status, physical attractiveness, and perceived power would predict PSHV. Although we made some differential predictions for same- and cross-gender harassment, we also examined the predictors for overall sexual harassment at each grade.

#### *Gender*

Research on PSHV in adolescence indicates no gender difference in victimization (AAUW, 2001). Boys and girls are equally likely to report sexual harassment from 8th to 11th grade (AAUW, 2001). However, a different pattern of results emerges when a distinction is made between same-gender and cross-gender harassment (Craig et al., 2001; McMasters et al., 2002). These studies indicate that there is no gender difference in victimization incidence for cross-gender

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