
Responding to Sexual Harassment: Implications for Counselling Adolescent Girls

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to outline the processes involved in adolescent girls' responding to sexual harassment. Grounded theory methodology was used to generate a theory of these processes. The core category elicited from interviews with ten participants was "learning about the self." Two processes were identified: "learning powerlessness" and "learning agency." These processes represented girls' movement from seeing themselves as "objects" of others' experience to becoming the "subjects" of their own experience. The counselling implications of the theory developed in the study are discussed.

Résumé

Le but de cette étude est de mettre en valeur les processus engagés lors de la réaction des adolescentes face à l'harcèlement sexuel. On a utilisé une méthodologie de théorie à base empirique pour élaborer une théorie de ces processus. La catégorie de base ressortant des entrevues avec dix participantes s'intitule "Apprendre sur soi-même." Deux processus ont été identifiés: "Apprendre l'impuissance" et "Apprendre le sentiment de puissance." Ces processus représentent le chemin parcouru par des jeunes filles allant du stade de se voir comme "objets" des expériences des autres à celle de devenir les "sujets" de leurs propres expériences. Les implications de counseling découlant de la théorie élaborée dans cette étude sont discutées.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, feminist scholars studying adolescent development have described adolescence as a time of crisis for young women (Bernardez, 1991; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Pipher, 1994; Tolman, 1994), including problems related to low self-esteem, eating disorders, and depression (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Pipher, 1994). Researchers have linked these psychological problems to social factors such as the cultural devaluing of females and female experiences, and persistent sexual harassment, sexual abuse and discrimination (e.g. Larkin, 1994). The purpose of the present study was to continue to explore how exposure to sexual harassment affects the psychological development of adolescent girls. Specifically, the goal was to understand how adolescent girls experience and overcome sexual harassment. The definition of sexual harassment used in the study was taken from a local school board pamphlet (Calgary Board of Education, 1995), in order to be consistent with other educational materials which were available to the participants. The definition read as follows.

Sexual harassment is any unwanted behaviour that is sexual in nature. In sexual harassment, there is an intent and/or effect of putting down,

abusing or hurting someone. Sexual harassment may be verbal or non-verbal behaviour. Sexual harassment may happen once or many times. Sexual harassment may threaten or upset a student's school work or learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Until the 1970s, the phenomenon of sexual harassment did not have a label. At that time, American feminists Farley (1978) and MacKinnon (1979) developed the term "sexual harassment" to describe male behaviours of dominance over women in the workplace. The original sexual harassment studies focused mainly on the work environment (e.g., Backhouse & Cohen, 1978; Bulzarik, 1978; Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979). Later studies in post-secondary education settings demonstrated that the problem of sexual harassment was not confined to the workplace (Adams, Kottke, & Padgitt, 1983; Dzeich & Weiner, 1984; Lott, Reilly, & Howard, 1982; McCaghy, 1985). Research attention then moved to public school settings, where studies conducted in the last five years have indicated that the problem of sexual harassment in schools is one of horrific proportions. A recent American study of more than 1500 students in grades 8-11 (American Association of University Women, 1993) indicated that 4 out of 5 students had been the target of some type of sexual harassment either at school or during a school-related activity. These rates are in contrast to post-secondary and employment contexts where rates of about 10 to 20 percent are more common. The results of a survey conducted by Roscoe, Strouse, and Goodwin (1994) also indicated that a large number of students (50% of females and 37% of males) had been sexually harassed by their peers. In Canada, a recent study conducted in Ontario by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (1995) showed that, by the time female students reach high school, at least 80 percent have experienced some form of sexual harassment at school. In addition, when asked if they are ever afraid of being sexually harassed, 75 percent of female students answered "yes," as did 25 percent of male students.

Although sexual harassment is a problem that affects both male and female students, research indicates that it is experienced more frequently and with greater intensity by girls than by boys (AAUW, 1993; Larkin, 1994; Roscoe, Strouse & Goodwin, 1994; Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, 1995; Stein, 1993; Yaffe, 1995). The costs of teenage girls' exposure to sexual harassment, on either a continual basis or as a single incident, are high. Among the primary psychological responses to harassment are lowered self-esteem and depression (Larkin, 1994; Watkinson, 1995). Negative responses to harassment are also evident in students' reduced ability to concentrate, increased irritability, and lowered grades (Bryant, 1993). Girls also report problematic physi-

ological responses to sexual harassment, including nausea, headaches, and insomnia (Larkin, 1994).

Most research on sexual harassment has focused either on the frequency of incidents of harassment or on the costs and impact for those whom it affects. However, the coping strategies used by young women to deal these problems have received only limited attention in the literature (Cairns, 1993, 1994). Our research was therefore focused on broadening knowledge about how sexual harassment affects young women's development and how they continue to be resilient in the face of such damaging experiences.

METHOD

This study used the grounded theory method described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to develop a theory of girls' processes of responding to the effects of sexual harassment experiences. Grounded theory methodology is particularly suited to the study of topics involving a social psychological process on which there is little research (Hutchinson, 1993). Its format, involving interview processes in which the researcher listens respectfully and intensely to the voices of the research participants, and "grounds" the resulting theory in their experiences, is also compatible with the principles of feminist research and theory development. The project was intended to provide a theoretical basis for future work in the area of adolescent girls' recovery from sexual harassment.

This study employed an open sampling procedure as the primary method of recruiting participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of open sampling is to seek out people and situations that will offer a maximal opportunity to gather the most pertinent information relating to the research topic. Potential participants were identified through two liaison personnel, both school board employees, on the basis of their known interest in gender issues, expressed at workshops or in class discussions. Potential participants were then approached individually by one of the liaison personnel and asked if they would be willing to receive an information package about the study or to attend a presentation conducted by the researchers. Participants were informed that a significant component of the interview process involved being able to think of and describe an incident of sexual harassment that was personally relevant for them, in which either they or a friend or classmate were the target of harassment. Both girls who had personally experienced harassment incidents and those who had observed the harassment of another young woman were included, as previous research indicates that both types of experience have significant effects on young women (Cairns, 1993, 1994). The information package included a description of the study, consent forms for parents and students, and a researcher contact phone number. The decision to contact the researcher was left to the

student and her guardian(s). Participants who responded positively to the request for participation were then contacted by telephone. Individual interviews were conducted with participants until saturation of categories was reached and further participants were not required.

The study participants included ten young women, aged 16-18 years, attending two public high schools. At the time of interviewing, the participants were either Grade 11 or Grade 12 students. Seven of the participants were Caucasian, two were East Indian, and one was Asian.

The first round of interviews included a discussion of each participant's reactions to the school board's educational materials on sexual harassment, including the definition of harassment provided above, and four associated stimulus scenarios which clarified the definition by depicting various common forms of sexual harassment. This initial interview was required to meet the school board's interests in the project and to ensure that the researcher and the participants were working from a shared definition of sexual harassment. At the conclusion of the first interview, each participant was asked to think about a personally relevant incident of sexual harassment she had experienced or witnessed, in preparation for the second interview. The interviews lasted, on average, about one hour.

Four of the participants continued with the second interview immediately after this activity, as their discussion of a personally relevant incident flowed naturally from their reactions to the stimulus scenarios and they preferred not to stop. The remaining six participants completed a second one-hour interview. In all cases, the researcher began the second interview component with the following statement: "I've asked you to consider and describe an incident of sexual harassment that is personally relevant to you. I'd like you to describe the incident and how you managed to cope with it. I'm particularly interested in how teenage girls survive sexual harassment. Feel free to talk about whatever you think is important on this subject."

The researcher used empathic listening and responding, open questions, reflections, paraphrasing and summarizing at various points throughout the interview process to encourage dialogue and to clarify ideas presented by the participants.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim. Analysis was conducted using open coding procedure. Open coding is the initial process in category building and involves breaking down and labeling the transcript material into units that represent a specific fact or event (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As the analysis of each transcript proceeded, the emerging codes were arranged visually in clusters according to similarity of meaning. Thus, clusters of concepts and tentative category

titles were developed for the first participant. As each subsequent transcript was studied and coded, material belonging to established codes was placed in existing categories. The researchers continuously determined whether or not "new" codes required separate categories or could be subsumed into existing ones.

Linking the Categories

The researchers then used both theoretical memo-writing and selective coding, as required by the paradigm model, in order to link the categories. Theoretical memos are written records of analysis that summarize ideas, ask questions, and identify further areas for investigation (Strauss Corbin, 1990). Selective coding involved asking the following questions: Which conditions lead to the process of survival of sexual harassment? What particular strategies are enacted in order to enable the survival process? In what context are these strategies employed? What are the consequences of employing the identified strategies to survive sexual harassment? Each category was analyzed for its relevance, with the above questions in mind.

A theory containing two phases and eight categories, grounded in the words of the participants, emerged through this structured interaction with the data during analysis. The theory was checked and rechecked against the transcripts and the coding processes.

RESULTS

The resulting grounded theory used "learning about self" as its core category, with two temporally linked sub-processes. The first of these, learning powerlessness, concerned learning to regard the self as an object of others' experience. The second process, learning agency, represents the process of becoming the subject of one's own experience. Each of these two processes contained four categories. The processes and their constituent categories are described below.

Learning Powerlessness

The process of learning powerlessness reflects a pattern of social interaction through which girls are made to understand that they are targeted for harassment because of their gender, which is evaluated as intrinsically "lesser than" that of their male peers. These interactions have the overall effect of teaching girls to view themselves as "objects" in a world defined by male experience. There were four categories involved with this process, including "becoming vulnerable through the male gaze," "self-doubt," "self-preservation" and "swallowing it up."

Becoming vulnerable through the male gaze. This category represents a significant precipitating event in the process of learning powerlessness.

After first being exposed to an incident of sexual harassment, participants spoke of sensing that they had suddenly and inexplicably been forced to become aware of their potential vulnerability to male verbal and physical aggression, and to definition of themselves as principally objective bodies rather than subjective persons. One participant described her experience in this manner:

Out of nowhere they come up with this stuff they say, and from then on you think, my goodness, people are thinking about my body at any time, then I really have to watch out. I always have to be conscious of it.

A second participant described how someone she saw being harassed became vulnerable:

That poor girl, she was sitting amongst all her classmates and things, and you can't really stand up for yourself when you're being singled out in front of a group like that . . . to be singled out that badly . . . and not being able to do anything about it.

Overall, this category involved a growing awareness of the public nature of one's being, and the vulnerability associated with being defined as an object by male peers.

Self-doubt. After experiencing harassment from male peers, girls searched for meanings for the experience, partly in an attempt to assert some control over future vulnerability. Although they knew at some level that the harasser was wholly responsible for targeting them for sexual harassment, the participants spoke of doubts about their own role in causing the incidents. One participant, for example, described how she wondered if she was somehow to blame for an incident of sexual harassment:

And as I'm walking away from him, I'm thinking, did I give an impression that I was interested, that I am that kind of girl, that I'm interested in this? You know . . . does he see it from me? And you question yourself . . . like your morals . . . what are you doing wrong? Maybe you should go and become a nun, go and that way he might not see you as . . . you know.

This process of self-doubt was symptomatic of the underlying view that she is the one who is out-of-place, who may have brought herself to the attention of male peers in a way that encouraged them to abuse her, and who is responsible to change her behaviour. It is an essential part of the process of understanding the school context, as well as the self, as male-defined. Self-doubt occurs in these young women when they are harassed, when they observe harassment, and when they attempt to resist it on their own behalf or on behalf of others. Thus, a second participant who felt very clearly that a line between welcome and unwelcome behaviour had been crossed by a harassing incident, also felt that she had to apologize for her anger in speaking out against a harasser. She apologized in spite of her awareness that the boys used much worse language in public on a daily basis.

He made it sound like I was the bad person. Well, I swore at him a couple of times, because I was really upset, and he goes to me, "Oh, there's no need to use that kind of language on the bus to offend other people." And that made me really upset, because I told him, "You're the one that is offending people by saying that." I apologized to people on the bus for swearing.

Self-preservation. The third category was labeled "self-preservation" and referred to actions undertaken by participants to stop further sexual harassment from taking place. Self-preservation strategies revolved around preventing attention or further attention from being called to oneself in order to ensure protection of the self. In many cases, participants routinely hid parts of their bodies, or dressed in ways that they thought protected them from the gaze of male peers. For example, Marie described hiding her body from others as a self-preserving act:

Once in physics class, for one of my tests, I just could not get myself to walk up to the front of the room and hand it in, because I knew people would look up, and oh no, they might look at my bum. So I waited until the person beside me was finished, and I got them to hand it in for me.

Another participant wanted to get away from public humiliation and decided to hide herself behind a building: "And I remember going behind the house and crying and crying and crying until later on. . . ." These attempts to protect themselves resulted in important distortions of the girls' daily activities, including choices of friends, clothing and participation in school events or sports.

Swallowing it up. The experiences of becoming aware of vulnerability, doubting the self, and employing negative strategies for self-preservation reflected the girls' growing sense of powerlessness as a result of the internalization of a concept of self-as-object. In essence, at some point in each girl's experience, she accepted a social perception that their gender dictates that girls are primarily sexual objects living in a male-defined context. This pattern represents the fourth category in the first process. One participant commented on the totality of the impact of absorbing negative messages about oneself:

It affects your self-confidence. . . it affects the way you look at yourself. . . that night you might go home and just think, yeah, he was right, and it may change your perspective on yourself. One isolated incident could possibly hurt somebody that much.

In a comment that was used to label this category, Tara explained that, in the current system, there didn't seem to be any options available to adolescent girls to make themselves feel powerful. Hence, their only choice was to "swallow up" the effect of the harassment:

Tara: It just keeps going. So then what does the girl do to make herself feel powerful?

(Interviewer: What options are there for that? What do you think?)

Tara: I don't see it, really. I think what she does is she just takes it in and swallows it up.

Another participant, Maria, also spoke of experiencing intense embarrassment or shame. At the time, she did not perceive that the embarrassment could be displaced to another source or experienced as anger.

When I walked by, they were saying something about female reproductive organs, and . . . I knew right then when they said that, I probably went totally red. Even today it affects how I . . . now I can see what it did to me.

The process of learning powerlessness thus culminates in a “swallowing up” of negative messages about the self and further internalization of a perception of self as an object.

Learning Agency

The second process contained in the grounded theory involved the participants’ later development of their own subjectivity. Through the four sub-processes outlined below, they were gradually able to shift from being primarily an object of others’ experience to being primarily the subject of their own experience. At this stage of the two-phase process of learning about the self, participants spoke about realizing that they were capable of taking back some power. They did not, while in the process of learning agency, focus on keeping their feelings and thoughts internal. Instead, they were able to externalize their emotions and beliefs and move towards the possibility of taking action. The four categories associated with this phase were identified as “recognition,” “solidarity with other women,” “taking action,” and “feeling in control.”

Recognition. The precipitating event that began the process of learning agency was “recognition.” While participants often associated vulnerability and powerlessness with their junior high school experiences of harassment, some began to recognize an injustice and to speak out against it in senior high school. One young woman remembers “sitting there and taking it” in response to sexually suggestive leers from her Grade 9 teacher. In contrast, she recounted that, in Grade 12, she recognized that it was a sexist practice to only have a male soccer team at school, and she approached the coach about the possibility of organizing a girls’ team:

In Grade 9, I was quite young . . . you don’t have the power . . . you don’t feel like you’re allowed to stand up to someone like your teacher . . . [in high school]. There was only a boys’ soccer team. I went to the coach and said there’s about a handful of us that want to play soccer. He said, “You can try out, I’m not going to stop you, but you’re going to get cut.”

While this experience did not have a positive outcome in terms of the development of a girls’ team, the participant felt better because she had attempted to take action in the situation. She felt entitled to her anger about the response she received and was clear about the injustice of the coach’s position. Another participant, Jackie, spoke of realizing the

larger implications behind a sexist “joke” she heard it in the school hallway that referred to violence against women:

Going back again to the lack of respect, that’s such a broad one, because it’s for all women, you know. And also, it goes deeper than that, it goes into wife-beating and . . . if these guys are joking about it, what if they think it’s okay or something?

The key factors in participants’ eventual decisions to speak out against sexual harassment and sexist practices was their recognition of the unfairness inherent in these and of the cumulative power of these events to distort the lives of girls and women.

Solidarity with other women. The context present throughout the “learning agency” process was the participants’ connection with other women in their schools. This category was labeled “solidarity with other women” and involved, first, knowing that one was not alone in facing and dealing with sexual harassment, and, second, having empathy for other young women in similar situations. There was a strong tendency to view one’s own situation in the context of the shared universality of being a teen-aged woman. Marline explained how being verbally harassed allowed her to gain an appreciation for the plight of other girls and to speak out in their defense:

Girls . . . are sensitive, you know. My guy friends, that I’ve been with . . . I know they’ve done it to other girls. And as soon as I hear them doing it in front of me, I go, “Where do you get off saying stuff like that to girls? Like, would you appreciate a guy who walked by and said it to me? You wouldn’t appreciate it, so just don’t do it.”

Empathy for other girls was a powerful motivator. After reaching the point of making a decision to become active participants in resisting their experiences of sexual harassment, participants were able to act on behalf of others through their identification with them. One participant described her empathic viewpoint in this manner:

I was really angry. Cause, in a way, I looked at her, and things like that have happened to me, and I felt her anger inside . . . as an outside person looking in on the situation. I didn’t like it very much.

Sexual harassment was a familiar experience for all of the participants. However, they were able to end the isolation and silence they felt as a result of exposure to it by realizing that they were not alone in their experiences. It was both encouraging and motivating for them to know that others had gone through the same thing, and to take action to prevent the harassment of other women.

Taking action. As girls increasingly became aware of their right to self-definition, and began to see themselves as agents rather than objects in the world, they began to take action against sexual harassment by confronting harassers or by trying to educate others about the issue. Some, like Marlene in the quote above, confronted their male friends directly. Others confronted their teachers and guidance counsellors about sexism

and about the harassment they saw happening in their schools. For example, one young woman made an appointment with her art teacher to bring to her attention the sexual harassment going on in her art class. Educating others principally involved talking and reasoning with them. Jackie described how she educated a group of guys in the hallway whom had she had overheard telling offensive jokes:

If it's people who look like they might have a bit of sense, sometimes I try to talk to them, or tell them, you know, you shouldn't joke about something like that. I've done it a few times before, and sometimes they'll stop and think, and say, "Yeah, you're right."

Feeling in control. The fourth category in learning agency was "feeling in control." It referred to participants' growing feeling of empowerment in their lives. Although they didn't always feel safer as a result of developing agency, they did feel more self-confident in their ability to handle an incident of sexual harassment. Janice described her newfound self-confidence in Grade 12 when she expressed her opinion to an English teacher whom she felt was behaving inappropriately:

At that time, I wasn't so much of a pussycat when it came to that kind of thing. I just voiced my opinion . . . I was just angry about it.

In comparison to her junior high experiences, in this instance Janice was able to experience and express her anger without ambivalence or self-doubt. Krista also felt more in control of handling an incident of harassment, saying: "Yeah, lay down the law right there and say nothing's going to happen. It's just a matter of having the ability to not let that happen."

Participants also explained that, in addition to feeling more in control of their own beliefs and actions, they learned that their increasing confidence in their own perceptions gave them more influence than they had previously exerted in their relationships with male peers. In describing her interaction with a male classmate, for example, Jennifer had this to say:

He'd still come up to me, and put his arm around my shoulder, but I'd just . . . push it around my waist. He'd come up and give me a bump on the hip, and that's it . . . we'd laugh or talk about something, and then it would be like . . . move your arm. And he'd just do it . . . and it would be fine.

As a result of feeling more in control of their own lives, participants were able to speak about what was true for them rather than further silencing themselves through their own beliefs and actions.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicated that participants developed through a complex process of resistance in order to become empowered to deal with sexual harassment. Several theorists have suggested that, for girls in adolescence, resistance to negative aspects of socialization manifests itself in both internal and external ways (Brown, 1991; Brown & Gilligan,

1992; Pipher, 1994). In the voices of the young women interviewed for this project, there is constant reference to the struggle first to conform to and then to resist society's, and especially male peers', views about who young women are, what they should be like and what their place in the world is.

Brown and Gilligan (1992), identify psychological resistance as a process of both questioning and silencing the self—a description which fits well with the results of this study. Their suggestion that expressions of psychological resistance are seen in girls' experiences of confusion and self-doubt are mirrored in our transcripts, which are replete with descriptions of the participants' struggle with learning powerlessness. A second form of resistance, political resistance, is described by Brown and Gilligan (1992) as an "... insistence on knowing what one knows and the willingness to be outspoken, rather than to collude in the silencing and avoidance of conflict" (p. 41). This description again fits well with our results in showing how young women struggle toward breaking their silence and learning to honour their own experiences and knowledge by speaking out against harassment.

Individual Counselling and Resistance

Counsellors working with young women need to be aware that many of them may have been significantly affected by sexual harassment. It is important that counsellors consider some of the "symptoms" commonly reported by adolescent girls, such as depression, low self-esteem, eating disturbances and falling grades as markers of the process of learning helplessness. The work of the counsellor with these students is to help them to move from learning helplessness to learning agency, or into the phase of political resistance (Gilligan, 1991). It becomes the counsellor's and client's mutual task to recognize that many internalized responses may be understood as responses to injustice.

In order to aid young women in voicing resistance to oppression, it might be helpful to engage in exercises of assertiveness training (Burstow, 1992) and consciousness raising. Such training can encourage a young woman to voice her wants and needs in relationships, and focus on externalizing her resistance to sexual harassment. It is important, as always, that this and other exercises are congruent with clients' own goals in therapy and with the counsellor's qualifications.

Counselling and Female Solidarity

The results of this study highlight the importance of solidarity with other women in the lives of these adolescent girls, as an element in the process of learning agency. Participants felt empowered to resist sexual harassment effectively in the context of solidarity with other women, both younger and older. Other women provided them with a sense that they

were not alone in their struggle. Both educators and psychologists have identified the importance of adolescent girls' connections to female peers and adult mentors (e.g., Berzoff, 1989; Gilligan, 1991; Mahony, 1989).

The participants in this project demonstrated that relating and empathizing with other young women was a necessary component of their journey to learning agency. Group counselling with adolescent girls may be a particularly effective medium for encouraging solidarity with other women and promoting the necessary sharing of experience. Group therapy can be a powerful tool in helping girls to recognize that they are not alone on their journey of dealing with pervasive sexism. Joan Berzoff (1989) comments on the power of groups for adolescent girls, stating that

Girls may use one another as models for identification, as mirrors to gain self knowledge, and as safe contexts to work through issues of differentiation while remaining connected. (p. 123)

Overall, the goal in group therapy with adolescent girls should be that they feel validated in their experiences and encouraged to develop as individuals in connection with others. Research confirms that such support is also helpful for survivors of sexual abuse and sexual assault (Bass & Davis, 1988).

Counsellors should also consider establishing a mentoring program in their school that matches adolescent girls with a female mentor from the school staff. Such a program should contain a training component for the mentors to ensure that they understand the healing process for young women and know how to facilitate it. Given limited staff resources, it may be necessary to limit the program to a single grade in high school, or to enlist women in the community to assist with the goal of providing mentors to these young women.

The Counsellor as Advocate

The role of the counsellor working with adolescent girls, who are likely to be exposed daily to sexual harassment at school, must include advocacy and education in addition to counselling in individual and group settings (Rowell, McBride, & Nelson-Leaf, 1996). At a most basic level, school counsellors should be informed about the prevalence of sexual harassment and its effect on the development of both girls and boys. Rowell, McBride and Nelson-Leaf (1996) suggest implementing a mandatory unit on understanding and responding to sexual harassment into the curriculum of courses such as health or career education.

However, the findings of this project suggest that this education may need to begin much earlier than high school. Significant damage is done to girls in their junior high experience of harassment. Not all of these girls can be expected to complete the recovery process identified in this

study on their own. Some educators suggest that harassment education begin as soon as schooling begins (Yaffe, 1995). Others speculate that educational programs are more effective with junior high school age students, who are developmentally more capable of engaging in dialogue about sexual harassment (Higginson, 1993). Developmental considerations such as level of cognitive and emotional understanding of students must be taken into consideration when designing such a curriculum.

Because we chose to study the process of how young women cope with sexual harassment, we have not discussed, in any detail, the pressing need for schools to recognize the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and to establish educational and intervention programs designed to reduce or eliminate it. In the best of all possible schools, young women would not be obliged to experience or observe harassment, and would not be faced with dilemmas about how to cope with it. The final responsibility for harassment lies not with these young women, but with harassers, the great majority of whom are male.

Guidance counsellors should therefore recognize their role as advocates in the area of primary prevention of sexual harassment. Primary prevention interventions could be aimed at several different levels, including administrative systems of the school board, parents of students, the school staff, and the students themselves. Counsellors' input would be invaluable in the development of school board policy and teacher training regarding sexual harassment. Working together, counsellors and administrative staff could develop educational programs to be utilized with parents and students. In addition, professional training days for school professionals could facilitate learning both methods to prevent sexual harassment in the classroom and ways to help students who have been negatively affected by their experiences. One participant in this study suggested that using drama would be an effective way to inform all groups about the emotional impact associated with sexual harassment.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was limited primarily by the procedures used for the selection of participants. Because they were selected for known interest in gender topics, our participants may well have represented a more informed subset of the school population. Assuming that this was the case, the results of this study should be understood as representing a potential resistance process rather than one which occurs in all instances. The study does not aim to be generalizable to all adolescent girls, but to suggest possible ways of understanding a basic process, an understanding which can then be subjected to testing through other research.

A second limitation may arise from the fact that the study's definition of sexual harassment, though very similar to the definitions currently

included in most organization's policy statements and in most research, may have circumscribed the types of incidents our participants' reported. Future studies that ask participants for their own definitions of harassment might clarify any distinctions between the incidents reported here and those that might be included if a participant-generated definition was used.

Grounded theory studies are meant to inform further research by suggesting processes for investigation. Given the paucity of Canadian studies of sexual harassment in the public schools, further survey research is required to identify the frequency, types of incidents, and effects of harassment experienced by students. Further studies are also needed to consider coping mechanisms, the specific impact of harassment on self-esteem and on learning outcomes, and the processes by which group support is useful to women. Some research suggests that the mechanisms by which men and boys learn to be sensitive to the impact of harassment are different from those used by women (Cairns, 1993, 1994). This possibility could be studied through the development and testing of gender-specific interventions, based on gender research, for use by counsellors in schools. A final suggestion is for the development of an instrument to measure the harassment "environment" in individual classrooms and schools. Such an instrument would permit regular assessment of classroom and school climate and the direction of educational and counselling interventions as needed.

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