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**Peer Sexual Harassment among Swedish Middle School Students:
a Study on Perceived Discomfort and Psychological Well-being**

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Abstract. This study aimed to investigate boys' and girls' experience of sexual harassment, especially in terms of perceived discomfort, and whether there is an association to their general psychological well-being (i.e., emotional problems and self-esteem). Online questionnaires were filled out by 968 Swedish fifth-grade students. Findings showed that girls reported significantly higher levels of discomfort related to sexual harassment than boys. Students who reported a high degree of discomfort reported higher levels of emotional problems and lower self-esteem compared to those who reported low or no discomfort. Victims of cross-gender harassment were underrepresented in the no discomfort-group. Our results suggest that level of perceived discomfort in relation to peer sexual harassment could be a mediating factor between peer sexual harassment and psychological well-being among children, highlighting the need to investigate this further.

Sexual harassment is a common problem in society (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2021) and is defined as “...any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another” (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2013, para. 3). Research suggests that sexual harassment among children occurs as early as the age of six, but the frequency seems to increase by the onset of puberty (McMaster et al., 2002). It is therefore likely that sexual harassment mainly has its onset during middle school and according to a report from the Friends Foundation (2020), 6-8% of children in year 3-6 have been exposed to sexual harassment at least once. Other results show that sexual harassment most likely peaks somewhere around the ages of 14 and 16 (Pepler et al., 2006). Peer group influence seems to play an important role in the perpetration of peer sexual harassment (American Association of University Women, 2001; McMaster et al., 2002). Studies have shown that if peer group norms are tolerant of sexual harassment, the individual members of the peer group were more likely to become perpetrators (American Association of University Women, 2001; Jewell & Brown, 2013; McMaster et al., 2002). It is likely that peer group influence is especially apparent in the school environment.

Previous research indicates that sexual harassment frequently takes place in the school environment. According to Lichty and Campbell (2012), 96% of middle school students had witnessed sexual harassment taking place in the school environment. In fact, in a study on sexual harassment in high schools by deLara (2008), participants stated that sexual harassment was very common among students and as a result of that it was found to be crucial for students to find strategies to deal with it happening in their daily lives. Examples of strategies used were accepting or ignoring the sexual harassment. In the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 2001) survey 47% of students who experienced peer sexual harassment reported feeling upset or somewhat upset after. This indicates that there is reason to believe that discomfort could be a frequent and direct consequence of sexual harassment. Earlier

research has shown that girls experience more sexual harassment than boys and most research regarding sexual harassment has focused on girls and women. This could be because of the fact that girls usually are sexualized to a greater extent than boys in Western CULTURE and therefore have been studied more extensively (American Psychological Association, 2007). However, several recent studies indicate that the prevalence of sexual harassment is nearly equal for boys and girls (Lichty & Campbell, 2012; McMaster et al., 2002) which raises the question of how boys are affected by sexual harassment, and whether their experience differs from that of girls.

Research has shown that sexual harassment during the adolescence has a negative impact on the individual's psychological well being (Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Skoog et al., 2016), and seems to have an effect on the development of emotional problems (Dahlqvist et al., 2016) and externalizing behaviour (Chiodo et al., 2009; Pepler et al., 2006; Rinehart et al., 2020). It has also been shown to have a negative impact on self-esteem (Gådin, 2012). Dahlqvist et al. (2016) suggests that there is a negative cycle between sexual harassment and depressive symptoms, where individuals who had experienced sexual harassment were more likely to develop depressive symptoms, which in turn led to an increased risk of being sexually harassed in the future for both boys and girls. However, research also indicates that the consequences of being sexually harassed could differ between boys and girls (Dahinten, 2003). Peer sexual harassment seems to have a larger negative impact on self-esteem (Gådin, 2012; Goldstein et al., 2007) and body image in girls than in boys (Gådin, 2012). Murnen and Smolak (2000) theorize based on L.M Brown and Gilligan's (1992) work that girls tend to silence themselves during adolescence in regards to how they feel and interpret their own feelings. This self-silencing behaviour could be a part of why sexual harassment have a larger negative impact on girls. In Murnen and Smolak's (2000) study on experiences of sexual harassment in grade school they found that many girls responded "don't know" to questions regarding possible reactions for a victim being exposed to peer sexual harassment, which they interpreted as self-silencing. These girls were seen to have lower social self-esteem, global self-esteem and body esteem. This was not the case for boys responding in the same way (Murnen & Smolak, 2000). Only social self-esteem was negatively related to responding "don't know" among the boys.

Not only does previous research indicate that consequences of peer sexual harassment could differ depending on the gender of the victim, it could also be dependent on the gender of the perpetrator (Sainio et al., 2013). In a study on middle school children researchers found that girls reported more fear related to cross-gender sexual harassment compared to boys (Murnen & Smolak, 2000). Sainio et al. (2013) found that girls reporting cross-gender sexual harassment victimization could have a higher possibility of later developing depressive symptoms. They also found that cross-gender sexual harassment victimization could have a negative impact on self-esteem for both boys and girls. Based on a study by Poulin and Pedersen (2007, referred to in Sainio et al., 2013), they theorized that these results are a consequence of the fact that normatively, boys and girls enter more cross-gender relationships in adolescence. They also theorized that these cross-gender relationships are of a higher importance than same-gender relationships at that age, which could possibly lead to cross-gender harassment having a bigger impact on the victim.

Current study/Purpose

As mentioned earlier, there are studies showing that boys and girls seemingly experience peer sexual harassment victimization equally often. In spite of this, most research so far has focused on girls. Because of this, knowledge about how boys experience peer sexual

harassment is scarce. The few previous studies investigating this subject indicate that there could be gender differences in consequences and symptomatology following peer sexual harassment. Since sexual harassment seems to have a large impact on several domains of an individual's psychological well-being it is therefore important to focus on both boys and girls, which we aim to do in this study.

The existing research on these topics has mainly focused on older children. The experiences of peer sexual harassment among younger children are thus not as well known. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate how children in year 5 experience sexual harassment and whether there is a difference in experience based on gender, particularly in reference to level of discomfort. We also aim to investigate if there are differences in discomfort depending on whether one has experienced cross-gender or same-gender peer sexual harassment. Furthermore, we intend to investigate whether there is a difference in discomfort and psychological well-being among victimized students, specifically focusing on emotional problems and self-esteem. Our research questions are:

- a) Is there a difference between boys and girls in experienced discomfort related to sexual harassment victimization?
- b) Is there a difference in emotional problems between those who have been victimized and those who have not? Among those being victimized, is there a difference in degree of discomfort and emotional problems?
- c) Is there a difference in self-esteem between those who have been victimized and those who have not? Among those being victimized, is there a difference in degree of discomfort and self-esteem?
- d) Does the discomfort of peer sexual harassment victimization differ between same-gender sexual harassment and cross-gender sexual harassment?

This study is written as a part of the PRISE project (Peer Relations In School from an Ecological perspective) at the University of Gothenburg. The PRISE project is a longitudinal research project, spanning three years. The project assesses peer sexual harassment in Swedish middle schools (year 4-6), including biological, psychosocial and contextual correlates.

Method

This study used data from the second time point of the PRISE-project when participants were in fifth grade (Skoog et al., 2019). Schools from 13 municipalities in western Sweden were contacted, with 30 schools agreeing to participate. Two schools withdrew before the second time point. Data was collected from schools, teachers and students annually between 2019, when the students were in fourth grade, and 2021, when the students were in sixth grade.

Participants

Our sample consisted of 968 fifth grade students, 96% of the original sample. The participating students had a mean age of 11 ($SD = 0.3$, range 9-12). The sample consisted of 464 boys, 490 girls and 10 participants who answered "other". 4 participants did not report their gender. 93,7% were born in Sweden and 30% of participants had at least one parent born in another country. Twenty-five percent had parents who were separated.

Procedure

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the data in the second time point was collected remotely through an online survey. The questionnaires were distributed through Qualtrics. Before answering the survey students watched an informative video which gave students information about the survey as well as information about a live chat function provided for the students to be able to ask the researchers questions about the survey. Students were also informed about how the confidentiality of their answers would be assured. Students answered the questionnaires during school hours on school computers and Ipads. The amount of time taken to answer the questionnaires ranged between 20-60 minutes.

Measures

Peer sexual harassment

Peer sexual harassment was measured using the victimization subscale of the Peer Sexual Harassment Scale - Child (PSH-C), consisting of 11 items (Skoog et al., 2019). The PSH-C was developed to capture different types of peer sexual harassment at school, including physical, verbal and visual kinds of harassment. To measure whether students had experienced peer sexual harassment victimization participants were asked; *Has any student done any of these things to you, even though you did not want it?*, followed by the 11 items. Students were asked to report if they had experienced any of these behaviours during year 5 using a 4-point Likert scale with the response alternatives 0 = *never*, 1 = *once*, 2 = *a few times*, and 3 = *several times*.

Originally the PSH-C consisted of six items, but an additional five items were added before the second wave of data collection. The eleven items used during the second time point were; 1) *touched your private body parts (for example willie/twinkle, butt, and breasts)?*, 2) *kissed or hugged you, or tried to?*, 3) *Called you homo, gay, lesbian or similar words?*, 4) *Called you dick, cunt, whore or similar?*, 5) *Made comments or jokes about private body parts (for example willie/twinkle, butt, and breasts) or sex?*, 6) *Showed, sent, or given you pictures or messages related to nudity or sex?*, 7) *Commented on how good-looking or ugly you are in front of other people?*, 8) *Taken or spread a picture of your body?*, 9) *Told or asked you to do something sexual (for example asked you to show your body, to touch your private body parts or touch another student's private body parts)?*, 10) *Pressed themselves against your body in a sexual way?*, and 11) *Spread sexual rumours about you?*.

Emotional problems

Emotional problems were measured using the emotional problems subscale from the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997), with items such as: 1) *I get a lot of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness* and 2) *I worry a lot*. Participants were asked to answer each item on a three-point scale ranging from 1 = *not true*, 2 = *partly true* and 3 = *completely true*. Each participants' raw scores on all five items were then added together to give an overall score on emotional problems, with scores ranging from 5 to 15.

Self-esteem

The Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE; Robins et al., 2001) was used to measure participants' self-esteem. The scale consists of the single statement *I have high self-esteem*

(“*Jag har bra självkänsla*”) which participants answered on a five-point scale with 1 = *not very true of me*, 3= *partially true of me*, and 5 = *very true of me*.

Discomfort

Participants who reported peer sexual harassment victimization were then asked to rate the unpleasantness of the situation. Those who reported several instances of PSH were asked to rate the latest incident. This was measured by the question “*How unpleasant was it?*” (“*Hur obehagligt var det som hände?*”) which was answered on a scale from 0-100, with 0=*not unpleasant at all*, 50= *quite unpleasant* and 100= *very unpleasant*.

Data analysis

All statistical analyses were performed in IBM SPSS statistics version 28. Because of the limited number of students answering “other” when asked about their gender identity, only students identifying as “boy” or “girl” were included in the analyses.

All study variables were checked for normality of distribution using skewness and kurtosis values as well as Shapiro-Wilk tests. The kurtosis values were all $< \pm 1$ meaning that they fall within the recommended values for normal distribution. The Shapiro-Wilk tests were significant for all study variables, emotional problems, self-esteem and discomfort, meaning that they were not normally distributed. Self-esteem was negatively skewed, meaning that most students reported a high self-esteem. Emotional problems and discomfort had a positive skewness meaning that most students reported low levels of depressive symptoms and discomfort. Due to this skewness we transformed the discomfort variable into four groups: “*no discomfort*”, “*low discomfort*”, “*medium discomfort*” and “*high discomfort*”. Because most participants reported a low level of discomfort, the range of scores included in each category varies to achieve more even group sizes. The “*no discomfort*” group consisted of 114 participants who answered 0, not unpleasant at all. The “*low discomfort*” group consisted of 201 participants who reported discomfort between 1-20, the “*medium discomfort*” group of 81 participants rating between 21-50 and the “*high discomfort*” group of 76 participants rating from 51 to 100. Due to the non-normality of our study variables, we mainly chose to use non-parametric tests to conduct our analyses.

We screened the data for missing values using Little’s MCAR test, $\chi^2(237) = 175.24$ ($p = .999$). Because the MCAR test was non-significant, meaning that data was missing at random, no measures were taken to compensate for missing values.

To answer research question a, regarding whether boys and girls experience different levels of discomfort in relation to peer sexual harassment, a two tailed independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the means of boys and girls in experienced discomfort. The robustness of *t*-tests are usually high in spite of non-normally distributed data (Garren & Osborne, 2021) and therefore we chose to use an independent samples’ *t*-test even though our data did not fulfill the assumptions for using *t*-tests.

Regarding research questions b and c, we used Kruskal Wallis tests to compare medians on emotional problems and self-esteem between different groups of discomfort. To determine whether there was a difference in emotional problems and self-esteem between those reporting being victimized and those who did not report being victimized we conducted Mann Whitney U-tests to compare mean ranks.

To answer research question d we used a Chi square test of independence to determine whether there was a difference in the victim’s degree of discomfort depending on whether the perpetrator was of the same or opposite sex.

Ethics

The PRISE study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reference number 2019-02755). Written informed consent was obtained from the legal guardians of participating students, as well as from participating teachers, prior to data collection. Students were informed that participating in the survey was voluntary and that they could skip questions or withdraw from participating at any point. They were also informed that no unauthorized person would have access to their answers, and that results would be presented at a group level so that no answer can be traced back to individual participants. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions the school health staff was informed about the study and students were told that they could talk to the school nurse or school counsellor if they felt the need to. Participating classes were given 1500 SEK for participating.

Results

The number of participants reporting being sexually harassed was 472. Of those reporting being sexually harassed, 244 were girls and 228 were boys. Many students reported being victims of several types of harassment. Table 1 presents an overview of frequencies of students reporting each type of sexual harassment divided by gender. Students reporting multiple types of sexual harassment are included in each category they reported.

Table 1.

Frequencies of students reporting being victimized divided by gender and types of sexual harassment.

Types of SH	Boys		Girls		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Verbal SH eg. calling someone homo, gay, lesbian	214	48	232	52	446
Unwanted sexual advances and indirect sexual aggression eg. spreading pictures, rumors or asking someone to do something sexual	41	45	50	55	91
Direct physical SH eg. touching someone's private body parts	76	42	106	58	182

To examine if girls and boys differed in levels of discomfort in relation to peer sexual harassment, an independent *t*-test was conducted. The girls reported a significantly higher level of discomfort ($M = 24.29$, $SD = 28.04$) compared to the boys ($M = 18.20$, $SD = 27.02$), $t(470) = -2.40$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = .22$.

A Mann Whitney U test was conducted to compare the medians of emotional problems between victimized and non-victimized participants. The victimized group reported more emotional problems ($Mdn = 8$) than the non-victimized group ($Mdn = 6.0$). This difference was significant ($U(N_{\text{victimized}} = 460, N_{\text{non-victimized}} = 462,) = 137460, z = 7.80, p < .001, r = 0.26$). A Kruskal Wallis test showed that there was a significant difference in emotional problems and degree of discomfort among victimized students, $H(3) = 19.00 p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons with adjusted p -values showed a significant difference between the high discomfort ($Mdn = 9$) and no discomfort ($Mdn = 7$) groups ($p < .001, r = .18$) as well as between the high discomfort and the low discomfort group ($Mdn = 7,4$) ($p < .01, r = .16$), with participants reporting a higher degree of discomfort also reporting a higher level of emotional problems. No significant differences were found between those who reported high and medium discomfort ($Mdn = 8,8$) ($p = .48$) or medium and low discomfort ($p = .83$). No significant differences were found between those who reported medium and no discomfort ($p = .19$) or those who reported low and no discomfort ($p = 1$). When running the test separately for boys and girls, the results were non-significant for boys ($H(3) = 6.48 p = .09$) and girls $H(3) = 4.75 p = .19$.

A Mann Whitney U test was conducted to compare the degree of self-esteem between victimized and non-victimized participants. This showed a significant difference in self-esteem between victimized (mean rank 425.80) and non-victimized participants (mean rank 520.45), ($U(N_{\text{victimized}} = 465, N_{\text{non-victimized}} = 462,) = 89652.5, z = -4.61, p < .001, r = -0.15$), with victimized students reporting a lower self-esteem. A Kruskal Wallis test showed that there was a significant difference in degree of discomfort and self-esteem among victimized students, $H(3)=18.78, p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons with adjusted p -values showed a significant difference between the high discomfort group ($Mdn = 3$) and low discomfort group ($Mdn = 4$) ($p < .01, r = .18$), as well as between the high discomfort group and the no discomfort group ($Mdn = 4$) ($p < .01 r = .17$), with those experiencing a higher degree of discomfort reporting lower self-esteem. No significant differences were found between the high discomfort group and medium discomfort group ($Mdn = 4$) ($p = .44$) or medium and low discomfort groups ($p = .48$). No significant differences were found between those who reported medium and no discomfort ($p = .42$) or those who reported low and no discomfort ($p = 1$). When running the test separately for boys and girls the results were significant for boys ($H(3) = 8.14 p = .04$) but not for girls $H(3) = 7.23 p = .07$.

Out of those reporting peer sexual harassment victimization, more girls (86%) reported cross-gender harassment compared to boys (14%). Regarding same-gender harassment the opposite was true, with more boys (77%) reporting same-gender harassment compared to girls (23%), see table 2.

Table 2.

Frequencies of cross-gender harassment and same-gender harassment among boys and girls.

	Boys		Girls		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>
Cross-gender and same-gender harassment					
Cross-gender	22	14	133	86	155
Same-gender	147	77	43	23	190

A Chi square test of independence was conducted to check for differences between those who experienced cross-gender and same-gender harassment. The results are reported in table 3. The overall model was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 21.39$ ($p < .01$). Analysis of standardized residuals showed that those who reported being victims of cross-gender harassment were underrepresented in the group with no discomfort ($z = -2.2$, $p < .05$). When running the test on boys and girls separately, the Chi square models were non-significant for boys ($\chi^2(6) = 9.29$, $p = .152$) and girls ($\chi^2(6) = 3.87$, $p = .703$).

Table 3.

Chi square test of independence showing groups of cross-gender and same-gender peer sexual harassment and discomfort in all participants.

Group ($n=381$)		Discomfort			
		No discomfort	Low discomfort	Medium discomfort	High discomfort
Same-gender harassment	Observed	43	97	25	25
	Expected	33.4	87.3	34.9	34.4
	Standardized residuals	1.7	1.0	-1.7	-1.6
Cross-gender harassment	Observed	16	65	38	36
	Expected	27.3	71.2	28.5	28.1
	Standardized residuals	-2.2*	-.7	1.8	1.5
Both	Observed	8	13	7	8
	Expected	6.3	16.5	6.6	6.5
	Standardized residuals	.7	-.9	.2	.6

$\chi^2(6) = 21.39$ ($p < .01$)

* $p < .05$

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate whether boys and girls in fifth grade experience sexual harassment differently and whether there is a connection between how they experience sexual harassment and their general psychological well-being. Our results show that girls reported a significantly higher level of discomfort related to peer sexual harassment victimization compared to boys. Furthermore, those who reported a high degree of discomfort reported higher levels of emotional problems compared to those who reported low or no discomfort in relation to peer sexual harassment. Similarly, those who reported a high degree of discomfort reported lower self-esteem compared to those who reported low or no discomfort. When comparing students who had experienced cross-gender harassment with those who had experienced same-gender harassment and those who had experienced both types, we found that those who reported cross-gender harassment were underrepresented in the group with no discomfort.

Our findings that girls reported a significantly higher discomfort than boys are in line with previous research that indicates that girls probably do experience more discomfort in relation to peer sexual harassment (Dahinten, 2003; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2016; Murnen & Smolak, 2000). Our findings regarding emotional problems and self-esteem seem to correspond with previous research that sexual harassment could have a variety of different connections to psychological well-being (Dahlqvist et al., 2016; Gådin, 2012). Although our results need to be interpreted carefully since the results were mostly non-significant when running the tests separately for boys and girls, except for self-esteem which was significant for boys but not girls. One possible reason for the non-significant results in the respective groups could be a result of smaller group sizes when conducting the separate tests, which results in less power. Furthermore, the small effect sizes also highlights the need to interpret the results carefully.

We also found that fewer than expected who experienced cross-gender harassment reported no discomfort in relation to the harassment but found no differences between gender. This slightly contradicts previous research, which has indicated that girls may find cross-gender harassment more unpleasant than same-gender harassment, with the opposite being true for boys (Murnen & Smolak, 2000). However, since participants overall reported a low level of discomfort, this might partially explain why there were no big differences in our results. Furthermore, differences in group sizes between cross- and same-gender harassment when running the tests for girls and boys separately might have affected the results. The differences in group sizes between same- and cross-gender harassment when divided by gender are in line with previous research that suggests that boys are more likely to be victims of same-gender sexual harassment and girls more likely to be victims of cross-gender harassment (Schnoll et al., 2015). Chiodo et al., (2009) gives an example of this phenomenon in their previous research where they found that boys who did not display aggression and sexual attraction to girls were more likely to be victims of same-gender sexual harassment, usually in the form of homophobic slurs. Although, as our cross-gender harassment group mainly consisted of girls and our same-gender harassment group mainly consisted of boys, the question is whether the results are affected by the fact that there are mostly girls in the cross-gender group or the possibility that cross-gender sexual harassment is actually experienced as worse. However, one might also argue that girls report more discomfort in general because they are more likely to be victims of cross-gender harassment which might be experienced as more unpleasant. Due to the design of this study it is not possible to make any conclusions in regards to this, but it would be an interesting angle for future research. As mentioned previous research has found that girls reporting cross-gender sexual harassment victimization could run a greater risk of later

developing depressive symptoms, and that cross-gender sexual harassment victimization could have a negative impact on self-esteem for both boys and girls (Sainio et al., 2013). Further investigating the possibly differing consequences of cross-gender peer sexual harassment and same-gender peer sexual harassment is therefore highly motivated.

Limitations

Due to the non-normal distribution and skewness of the data, we had to use non-parametric tests which limits the conclusions we can make because of the resulting loss of information in transforming variables to nominal data, as well as loss of power.

There are several other factors that might affect how an individual experiences sexual harassment that we have not included in this study. For example, we have not considered whether someone has repeatedly experienced sexual harassment compared to those who experienced it only on one occasion and the participants are asked to only report instances that occurred during fifth grade. It would be interesting to investigate whether there is a difference in discomfort based on when the first instance of peer sexual harassment occurred. Depending on how far the victim has come in their social and sexual development, that might affect how they perceive the harassment, as well as how they handle it, both of which in turn might affect the long-term consequences. For instance Gruber and Fineran (2007) found that when comparing high school and middle school girls, the older girls were less likely to suffer negative consequences of sexual harassment, despite reporting it as more upsetting compared to middle school girls.

Other factors that might influence the experience could be where the harassment took place, if there were any witnesses and how they reacted, the age of the perpetrator and whether the individual was harassed by one or multiple perpetrators. We have also not looked into how the victim responded to the harassment, if they told anyone and how the person they told reacted, which could also have a possible effect on the outcome. Another perspective we have not considered is possible protective factors and resilience in the individual and how that may affect the outcome of peer sexual harassment. Another interesting perspective to investigate would be whether an individual experiences sexual harassment differently depending on whether they previously have witnessed others being sexually harassed.

Regarding the discomfort item in the questionnaire, we found that ratings were often low. It is an interesting point of view that children might not find peer sexual harassment as unpleasant as researchers think. In previous research it has been hypothesized that there could be a discrepancy between what children see as sexual harassment and what researchers see as sexual harassment (Dahinten, 2003). This could possibly contribute to our results.

Another possible contributor to the results could be that the participants were asked to rate the discomfort in relation to the most recent peer sexual harassment victimization. It is evident that verbal items are the most frequently reported types of peer sexual harassment, which could mean that it is mostly verbal peer sexual harassment being rated. The literature on peer sexual harassment indicates that there is a widespread acceptance of peer sexual harassment overall (C. S. Brown et al., 2020). It is likely that verbal harassment is more widely accepted compared to physical sexual harassment. One could hypothesize that the discomfort therefore could be higher in relation to more aggressive kinds of peer sexual harassment. For example, asking about the worst experienced peer sexual harassment could have had an impact on the ratings. There is a risk that by not asking about the worst experience among the participants, we miss out on what grade of discomfort is usually experienced in regards to other types of sexual harassment than the verbal kind. Another question that could have been asked is what kind of sexual harassment the participants experienced last to know which kind type of

sexual harassment they are rating in regards to discomfort. This would give an opportunity to understand the experiences in more detail.

Future research

As the survey question about discomfort was added into the survey for the second time-point it was not possible for us to look at longitudinal data. However, for future research it would be interesting to look at discomfort with a longitudinal perspective. A longitudinal design would also increase the ability to look at consequences and long-term effects of sexual harassment, as well as repeated victimization.

As mentioned above, verbal items were the most frequently reported types of peer sexual harassment, with 46% of our original sample reporting having experienced this type of sexual harassment. While our participants reported a low degree of discomfort overall it is still important to investigate further, as it has been theorized that accepting or normalizing discrimination at any level could lead to a tolerance of and permitting of even worse types of discrimination (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). It would be interesting to investigate whether there is a connection between experiencing verbal sexual harassment and later experiencing or perpetrating more aggressive forms of sexual harassment. Knowledge on how different types of discrimination or harassment potentially are connected could have an important impact on how to shape interventions.

Due to only a small number of students in our sample responding “other” in regards to their gender, all analyses have been conducted with a binary model of gender, only using data from students who define themselves as boys or girls. This is a limitation in our study, especially as previous research has shown that people who deviate from societal norms, such as gender binary norms and heteronormativity, are more likely to be targeted (C. S. Brown et al., 2020). In future research, including gender-nonconforming or non-binary participants would give more depth to analyses and further enlighten the different aspects of peer sexual harassment. Furthermore, much of the literature on peer sexual harassment tends to stem from a heteronormative context, with theories regarding cross- and same-gender harassment often being overtly heteronormative. For example, some theories of cross- and same-gender view same gender harassment as “degrading opponents” and cross-gender harassment as sexual solicitation (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017), which implies attraction only to the opposite sex and this explanation likely would not apply to individuals who are not heterosexual. However, sexual orientation of victims and perpetrators rarely gets taken into account when motives behind and reactions to sexual harassment are studied. It would be interesting for future research to investigate what potential role sexual orientation of both victim and perpetrator has in the phenomenon that is sexual harassment.

Conclusions

Our results are mostly in line with previous research confirming that many young children experience peer sexual harassment victimization and that girls experience a higher discomfort than boys in relation to peer sexual harassment. However, participants surprisingly reported a low degree of discomfort overall. Our results also suggest that level of perceived discomfort in relation to peer sexual harassment could be a mediating factor between peer sexual harassment and psychological well-being among children, highlighting the need to investigate this further.

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