

Peer Sexual Harassment  
in the Transition From  
Childhood to Adolescence

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**UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG**



# Peer Sexual Harassment in the Transition from Childhood to Adolescence

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*To my daughter,  
for always reminding me what's important in life.*



# Abstract

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Peer sexual harassment is common among adolescents at school and is associated with adverse psychological outcomes for those involved. Despite this, research on peer sexual harassment in the transition from childhood to adolescence is lacking. The overarching aim of this doctoral thesis was to address peer sexual harassment in the developmentally sensitive period of the transition between childhood and adolescence. The included studies were conducted within the three-year longitudinal PRISE project, with data collected annually in Grades 4 (T1) to 6 (T3) from one cohort of students via questionnaires. In **Study I** ( $N = 1007$ ) the aim was to evaluate a new scale, the Peer Sexual Harassment Scale-Child (PSH-C), designed to capture peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence in the school context. Results showed that the PSH-C displayed good psychometric properties, and revealed a two-dimensional structure of the scale in both ten-year-old boys and girls: one dimension reflecting direct verbal sexual aggression and the other reflecting general sexual harassment. Compared to previous research on older adolescents, the results suggest that the peer sexual harassment construct may be structured differently in early adolescence, and gender differences may be less profound. In **Study II** ( $N = 997$ ), the lack of knowledge of peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence was addressed by using the PSH-C to examine associations between victimization, perpetration, or witnessing and emotional problems, and how these associations were moderated by gender and class occurrence of peer sexual harassment among ten-year-olds. Results showed that 45% of the participants reported victimization through, 17% perpetration of, and 60% witnessing sexual harassment, with vast overlaps between roles. Sexual harassment victimization and witnessing were related to more emotional problems compared to those not involved. Among those who were victimized, girls reported more emotional problems than boys; while among those who perpetrated, girls reported fewer emotional problems than boys. Both the prevalence of sexual harassment and associations between sexual harassment and

emotional problems varied across classrooms, emphasizing the need to take into account contextual factors. **Study III** aimed to longitudinally examine between-individual, within-individual, and within-school-class variability of the association between peer sexual harassment victimization and emotional problems across early adolescence (ages 10-12 years), also testing the moderating effect of gender (T1  $N = 997$ , T2  $N = 966$ , T3  $N = 879$ ). Results showed that victimization was related to more emotional problems across time among both girls and boys, but victimized girls reported more emotional problems than victimized boys. The association between victimization and emotional problems became weaker over time, but not for every individual or in every school class. Instead, adolescents reporting more initial emotional problems reported more emotional problems when victimized over time; and in school classes with lower initial levels of adolescent emotional problems, adolescents reported more emotional problems when victimized over time. Together, the studies contribute to a nuanced understanding of peer sexual harassment during the critical transition from childhood to adolescence, highlighting both developmental and contextual factors.

*Keywords:* peer sexual harassment, late childhood, early adolescence, measurement, victimization, perpetration, witnessing, emotional problems, school-class context, psychosocial development

## Swedish Summary

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Sexuella trakasserier bland unga är ett utbrett problem i hela världen. Forskning visar att de ungdomar som är involverade i sexuella trakasserier ofta mår sämre och rapporterar fler emotionella problem, såsom nedstämdhet och ångest, än de som inte är involverade (Rinehart et al., 2020; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023). Studier har även visat att upplevelsen av emotionella problem i samband med sexuella trakasserier kan påverka individens fortsatta psykosociala utveckling (Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023). Att förstå sexuella trakasserier mellan jämnåriga under utvecklingskänsliga perioder, som exempelvis i övergången mellan barn- och ungdomsåren, är därför viktigt för att kunna främja barn och ungas utveckling i en positiv riktning. Övergången mellan barn- och ungdomsåren är också en tid då vänner och jämnåriga blir allt viktigare. Det är i dessa relationer som barnen börjar utforska sin identitet och öva på de relationella och emotionella färdigheter som är nödvändiga för att kunna må bra genom hela livet (Barnes et al., 2007). Eftersom önskan om att vara omtyckt och accepterad av sina jämnåriga är särskilt stark i denna ålder, kan negativa upplevelser kopplade till jämnåriga - såsom sexuella trakasserier - ha en större inverkan på utvecklingen än om de sker under en mer stabil period i livet (Heim & Binder, 2012; Tomova et al., 2021). Trots detta saknas forskning om sexuella trakasserier bland jämnåriga i just övergången från barn- till ungdomsåren, varför vi i dagsläget varken vet hur vanligt det är eller hur sambandet mellan att vara inblandad i sexuella trakasserier och mående ser ut i denna ålder.

Det övergripande syftet med denna doktorsavhandling var därför att undersöka sexuella trakasserier mellan jämnåriga i den utvecklingsmässigt känsliga perioden mellan barn- och ungdomsåren. De inkluderade studierna genomfördes inom det treåriga longitudinella PRISE-projektet, där data samlades in årligen i årskurs 4 (T1) till 6 (T3) från en kohort av elever via frågeformulär (ålder 10 till 12 år).

Syftet med **Studie I** (T1,  $N = 1007$ ) var att utvärdera en ny skala, the Peer Sexual Harassment Scale–Child (PSH-C), som utformats särskilt för att mäta sexuella trakasserier i skolan bland jämnåriga i övergången från barn- till ungdomsåren. Resultaten visade att PSH-C hade goda psykometriska egenskaper och att skalan hade en tvådimensionell struktur hos både 10-åriga pojkar och

flickor: en dimension som representerade *direkt verbal sexuell aggression* (t.ex. kalla någon för bög eller hora) och en som representerade *allmänna sexuella trakasserier* (t.ex. tafsa, verbala kommentarer och skämt eller bilder och meddelanden med sexuellt innehåll). Detta resultat indikerar att sexuella trakasserier bland jämnåriga kan skilja sig baserat på ålder, där de könsskillnader man funnit bland äldre ungdomar i hur pojkar och flickor förstår och svarar på frågor (McMaster et al., 2002; Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005) inte verkar vara lika framträdande i yngre åldrar, och där den struktur man funnit bland äldre ungdomar uppdelad på fysiska och icke-fysiska trakasserier (Ortega et al., 2010; Vega-Gea et al., 2016; Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005) inte tycks ge ett lika bra förklaringsvärde bland yngre. Resultatet lyfter vikten av att förstå sexuella trakasserier bland unga ur ett utvecklingsperspektiv, där det som är sant bland äldre ungdomar inte nödvändigtvis behöver vara sant bland yngre.

I **Studie II** (T1, N = 997) var syftet att använda PSH-C för att vidare förstå sexuella trakasserier i övergången mellan barn- och ungdomsåren. Studien undersöker relationen mellan utsatthet för, utövande av och bevittnandet av sexuella trakasserier och emotionella problem, samt hur dessa samband modereras av kön och klassrumsprevalens av sexuella trakasserier bland 10-åringar. Resultaten visade att 45% av deltagarna rapporterade att de blivit utsatta, 17% att de utsatt en jämnårig och 60% att de bevittnat sexuella trakasserier mellan jämnåriga vid minst ett tillfälle under pågående läsår, med ett stort överlapp mellan rollerna. De som rapporterade att de blivit utsatta eller bevittnat sexuella trakasserier rapporterade mer emotionella problem än de som inte blivit utsatta eller bevittnat. Utsatta flickor rapporterade fler emotionella problem än utsatta pojkar, medan flickor som utsatte andra rapporterade färre emotionella problem än pojkar som utsatte andra. Både förekomsten av sexuella trakasserier och sambandet mellan sexuella trakasserier och emotionella problem varierade mellan skolklasser. Resultaten belyser förekomsten av sexuella trakasserier i yngre åldrar och bekräftar att sambandet med emotionella problem man funnit i äldre åldrar också finns bland yngre. Vidare visar resultaten på vikten av att ta kontextuella aspekter, så som klassrumskontext, i beaktande när sexuella trakasserier bland jämnåriga studeras i övergången mellan barn- och ungdomsåren.

**Studie III** syftade till att undersöka sambandet mellan att bli utsatt för sexuella trakasserier och emotionella problem över tid genom att också ta hänsyn till kontextuella aspekter. Studien undersökte variationen i detta samband mellan individer, inom individer och inom skolklasser under tidiga tonåren (10

till 12 år), och testade även den modererande effekten av kön (T1 N = 997; T2 N = 966; T3 N = 879). Resultaten visade att utsatthet var relaterat till mer emotionella problem över tid bland både flickor och pojkar, men att utsatta flickor rapporterade mer emotionella problem än utsatta pojkar. Sambandet mellan utsatthet och emotionella problem var som starkast vid 10 års ålder och minskade sedan över tid, vilket även gällde för variationen mellan skolklasser. Att sambandet minskade över tid var dock inte sant för varje individ eller i varje skolklass. I stället framkom en variation både inom individer och inom skolklasser, där deltagare som hade mer emotionella problem vid 10 års ålder också utvecklade mer emotionella problem när de blev utsatta över tid, och där elever i skolklasser med lägre nivåer av emotionella problem vid 10 års ålder rapporterade mer emotionella problem när de blev utsatta över tid. Våra resultat visar hur allvarligt förekomsten av sexuella trakasserier från jämnåriga i tidiga tonåren kan vara för särskilt sårbara individer ur ett utvecklingsperspektiv. Resultaten visar dock också att majoriteten av barn och unga rapporterar mindre emotionella problem när de blir utsatta över tid, vilket kan tyda på att många blir bättre på att hantera sin utsatthet ju äldre de blir. Att aktivt förebygga och hantera förekomsten av sexuella trakasserier från jämnåriga tidigt kan därför vara en viktig insats för att alla barn och unga, oavsett förutsättningar, ska kunna få en positiv utveckling genom livet.

Den samlade kunskapen från denna doktorsavhandling ger en nyanserad förståelse av sexuella trakasserier mellan jämnåriga under den utvecklingsmässigt känsliga perioden mellan barn- och ungdomsåren. Den belyser behovet av riktade insatser som tar hänsyn till både utvecklingsrelaterade och kontextuella faktorer. Sammantaget visar studierna att sexuella trakasserier från jämnåriga är en vanlig erfarenhet för elever redan i mellanstadiet och att både pojkar och flickor som utsätts för eller bevittnar sexuella trakasserier rapporterar mer emotionella problem än de som inte är involverade. Värt att notera är att ju yngre deltagarna var, desto starkare var sambandet med emotionella problem. Två viktiga utvecklingsaspekter som identifierades var att begreppet sexuella trakasserier från jämnåriga kan vara annorlunda strukturerat i barn- jämfört med ungdomsåren, och att vissa individer kan vara mer sårbara än andra när de utsätts. Resultaten lyfter vidare fram kontextens betydelse, där både förekomsten av sexuella trakasserier och hur utsatthet för sexuella trakasserier relaterar till emotionella problem varierar mellan olika skolklasser. Sammantaget understryker resultaten vikten av att studera sexuella trakasserier i yngre åldrar utifrån

såväl ett utvecklings- som ett ekologiskt perspektiv, med en medvetenhet om att både förekomst och påverkan varierar mellan individer och skolklasser. Tillsammans kan dessa resultat ligga till grund för ytterligare forskning och praktiska åtgärder som kan bidra till att främja trygga och positiva sammanhang för alla barn och ungdomar.

## Preface

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This thesis consists of a summary and the following three papers, referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

- I. Valik, A., Holmqvist Gattario, K., Lunde, C., & Skoog, T. (2023). PSH-C: A Measure of Peer Sexual Harassment Among Children. *Journal of Social Issues*, 79, 1123-1146.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12517>
- II. Valik, A., Lunde, C., & Skoog, T., & Holmqvist Gattario, K. (2024). Peer Sexual Harassment Among 10-Year-Olds: Roles, Genders, Classroom Occurrence, and Associations with Emotional Problems. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 00, 1-15.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12921>
- III. Valik, A., Lunde, C., Skoog, T., & Holmqvist Gattario, K. (2024). *The Development of Peer Sexual Harassment Victimization and Emotional Problems Across Early Adolescence*. Manuscript submitted for publication.



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*Andrea Valik*  
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# Introduction

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In recent decades, knowledge about peer sexual harassment among youths has substantially increased. Empirical studies show that sexual harassment is common among adolescents and is associated with adverse psychological outcomes for those involved, such as increased emotional problems including depressive symptoms and anxiety (Rinehart et al., 2020; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023). Experiencing emotional problems in relation to sexual harassment may in turn influence an individual's future psychosocial development (Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023). Thus, understanding peer sexual harassment during developmentally sensitive periods of life can be especially important in promoting healthy development among youths. The transition between childhood and adolescence arguably comprises such a period. This is also a critical time in life for the development of complex socio-emotional and cognitive skills that will influence later mental health outcomes (Lamblin et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2018). Peers become increasingly important at this age, and it is in these relationships that children begin to explore their identity and practice the relational and emotional skills they will need in order to thrive and flourish throughout life (Barnes et al., 2007). Thus, being liked and accepted by peers is highly salient as to why negative experiences related to peers – such as peer sexual harassment – may have a stronger impact on children's development than if they occur during a more stable period in life (Heim & Binder, 2012; Tomova et al., 2021). Consequently, both positive and negative experiences of peer relationships in the transition between childhood and adolescence become an important aspect in shaping and directing young people's psychosocial development (Barnes et al., 2007). Despite this, research on peer sexual harassment during this transition is lacking; thus, how peer sexual harassment may be related to emotional problems during this developmentally sensitive period is yet to be explored.

Peer sexual harassment is often defined as unwanted sexual attention, including verbal, physical, and visual behaviors, such as homophobic name-calling, touching or grabbing, or sending pictures related to nudity or sex (McMaster et al., 2002). Youths may be involved in peer sexual harassment through different roles – as victims, perpetrators, and/or witnesses – and these roles have in

turn been found to often overlap (Li & Craig, 2020; McMaster et al., 2002). The perspectives used to understand peer sexual harassment among youths often offer explanations on a structural, individual, and/or contextual level. Explanations on the structural level use the prevailing social structures, such as gender norms or power imbalance between genders, to explain the occurrence of peer sexual harassment (Conroy, 2013). Explanations on the individual level instead focus on individual psychological or developmental characteristics, such as pubertal development or relational maturity (McMaster et al., 2002; Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b). Lastly, explanations on the contextual level focus on aspects such as school-class context, social support among class peers, or relationships with teachers (Attar-Schwartz, 2009; Basile et al., 2016). As human development is complex, the understanding of peer sexual harassment among youths can likely be found at all three of these levels. Thus, all three perspectives will be addressed in this thesis in order to understand and discuss the findings in the three included studies.

The overarching aim of the thesis is to address peer sexual harassment in the developmentally sensitive period of the transition between childhood and adolescence. More specifically, the thesis aims to advance the field of knowledge on peer sexual harassment in three respects, called for by the current gaps in the literature. In Study I, a measurement tool developed to capture peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence (ages 10 to 12 years) will be developed and evaluated. Thereafter, to enhance knowledge about peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence, Study II will examine peer sexual harassment prevalence, roles (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing), classroom occurrence, and associations with emotional problems among ten-year-olds. Lastly, in Study III, the association between peer sexual harassment victimization and emotional problems will be studied across time, also separating between-individual, within-individual, and within-school-class variability. Together, these studies will provide empirical knowledge to advance the field of peer sexual harassment research in a developmentally important period of children's lives, namely the transition from childhood to adolescence. The thesis also intends to provide valuable information for professionals working with children and early adolescents in school settings. Thus, I hope that the insights generated by the thesis will extend its benefits to the very subjects it addresses – namely, the children.

## Defining Peer Sexual Harassment

In the present thesis, peer sexual harassment is defined as “improper behavior with a sexual dimension” (O’Donohue et al., 1998) or “unwanted sexual attention” (McMaster et al., 2002) occurring between peers in early adolescence (ages 10-12 years). More specifically, the literature defines a three-dimensional construct whereby sexual harassment can be seen as a blanket term, consisting of sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and/or gender harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). It comprises a range of verbal, physical, and visual direct or indirect externalizing behaviors, including uninvited sexual comments, homophobic and misogynistic name-calling, spreading of sexual rumors, being brushed against or touched in a sexual way, showing or sharing sexual pictures, and requests for sexual favors (Hill & Kearl, 2011). This thesis specifically studies sexual harassment occurring between peers at school, peers being defined as belonging to the same societal group, especially based on age, grade, or status (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Thus, sexual harassment occurring between, for example, school personnel and students is not included. More severe forms of sexual violence, such as rape, are also not included in the definition used.

In Sweden, where the data for this thesis were collected, sexual harassment is regulated under the Swedish Discrimination Act, in which it is defined as a “conduct of a sexual nature that violates someone’s dignity” (Diskrimineringsombudsmannen [2008:567], 2018). In turn, Swedish schools are subject to the provisions of the Swedish Education Act, governed by the Discrimination Act, which states that all students have the right to safe schooling without being exposed to sexual harassment (Skolverket, 2023). Thus, the schools included in the thesis are required by law to actively work against peer sexual harassment within their context. However, as the actual work against peer sexual harassment is not specified or regulated in the Act, schools may vary in what they do to prevent and address it.

Another important aspect in defining peer sexual harassment entails doing this in relation to other forms of peer victimization or peer aggression, especially bullying, which is one of the most studied forms of peer victimization in early adolescence. The definition of bullying has been, and still is, both critiqued and debated. The most common definition used in the literature comprises three criteria: intention to inflict harm, repetition, and imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). According to this definition, bullying is a type of

aggression with unique and distinct components of repetition and power imbalance that lack the more impulsive and temporarily restricted violence that is used, for example, in a single physical fight (Hellström et al., 2021). Several researchers distinguish between peer sexual harassment and bullying, arguing for the importance of studying them separately (Buchanan & McDougall, 2021; Gruber & Fineran, 2008) or even as two unique constructs (Stein & Taylor, 2023). According to Gruber and Fineran (2008), peer sexual harassment is more directly and clearly associated with hegemonic masculinity – in other words stereotypical masculine heterosexual values – compared to bullying of a gendered and sexual nature. This means that peer sexual harassment draws on powerful structural and culturally sanctioned roles and meanings (masculine-feminine, heterosexual-homosexual), which are essential elements of social stratification. Gruber and Fineran (2008) therefore argue that classifying peer sexual harassment under the heading of bullying is problematic because it raises the possibility that victimization based on a student's gender identity or sexual orientation (e.g., homophobic name-calling) could be misunderstood as a personal or interpersonal issue when it instead might be an expression of gender power dynamics. In addition, peer sexual harassment has also been described in the literature as possibly being driven by sexual interest (Pina et al., 2009), contrasting with other forms of peer victimization.

There is also support in the empirical literature for a distinction between peer sexual harassment and bullying. For example, Espelage and colleagues (2018), testing the factor structure of peer sexual harassment in the form of homophobic name-calling in relation to bullying, found that a two-factor solution in which bullying and homophobic name-calling were treated as distinct latent constructs fitted the data better than a one-factor solution did (Espelage, Hong, et al., 2018). Peer sexual harassment victimization was also found by Gruber and Fineran (2008) to have a stronger negative correlation than bullying with the health of young individuals. Together, these findings support the need to investigate peer sexual harassment separate from other forms of victimization, such as bullying. There are hence both theoretical and empirical arguments for viewing peer sexual harassment as a construct of its own.

Against this background, the present thesis will hereafter address and discuss peer sexual harassment as a construct of its own, separate from other forms of peer victimization.

## Measuring Peer Sexual Harassment in the Transition from Childhood to Adolescence

To be able to study peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence, it is essential to use properly evaluated measures adapted for the age group studied. The measure needs to be reliable (meaning that it produces consistent measurements) and valid (meaning that it measures the properties it is designed to measure). To ensure a measure's validity and feasibility, it is also necessary to consider the target group's developmental conditions and context, meaning that the measure must be developmentally informed (Gray & Wakschlag, 2020). The transition between childhood and adolescence (ages 10–12 years) is a period of increasing cognitive, emotional, and relational abilities during which peer relations are a central aspect of everyday life. At this age, one's cognitive functions are characterized by a concrete understanding, and reading ability is generally established (Bjorklund & Causey, 2018; Ehri, 2005). Thus, in order to be able to gather information in a valid way, measures of peer sexual harassment in early adolescence should use few abstract wordings, be presented in a clear and simple structure, and use short, concrete sentences or phrasings. Unfortunately, a critical obstacle to advancing research on peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence is that there are no existing measures of peer sexual harassment designed for children aged 10–12 years. Although there are measures for assessing gender harassment among children, such as verbal teasing, physical bullying, and rejection by the peer group for not conforming to gender stereotypes (Tam & Brown, 2020), these do not capture the full scope of peer sexual harassment.

Peer sexual harassment is most commonly measured by relating observable behavior (e.g., homophobic name-calling) to an unobservable construct (peer sexual harassment). Modern measurement theory comprises a family of statistical methods that were developed to improve our ability to measure these unobservable constructs, also called latent variables (Houts et al., 2022). One of the most commonly used models in modern measurement theory is the factor model, which allows us to investigate the structure and effect of the latent variables through the analysis of interindividual differences data by statistically relating covariation between observed variables to latent variables (Borsboom et al., 2003). When peer sexual harassment is understood as a latent variable, the

overarching definition of “improper behavior with a sexual dimension” (O’Donohue et al., 1998) or “unwanted sexual attention” (McMaster et al., 2002) is comprised of specific behaviors such as uninvited sexual comments, homophobic name-calling, or being brushed against or touched in a sexual way (Hill & Kearl, 2011). The use of the factor model is then helpful in determining how behaviors measured through specific items (e.g., uninvited sexual comments) relate to the overall construct of peer sexual harassment and how much information each item adds to our understanding of an individual’s level within the construct. This method also provides a means for exploring and understanding the dimensions of our latent variable, which in turn could be comprised of several specific items (Houts et al., 2022). For example, the latent variable of peer sexual harassment may be comprised of one or more dimensions, such as verbal or physical forms. Verbal forms may in turn be comprised of items measuring uninvited sexual comments and homophobic name-calling, while physical forms could be comprised of items measuring being brushed against or touched in a sexual way. Hence, using a factor model makes it possible to understand whether the items used are measuring the same latent variable (i.e., peer sexual harassment) or whether it is multiple latent variables that are being measured; and, whether the items are measuring certain dimensions within the latent construct (e.g., verbal and physical forms; Borsboom et al., 2003).

The most widely used measure of sexual harassment among young people in the literature today is the American Association of University Women (AAUW) survey, developed for adolescents in Grades 7 (around 13 years of age) and up (Bryant, 1993; Hill & Kearl, 2011). As the AAUW was developed for adolescents, the scale requires that participants have reached a certain level of socio-cognitive maturity (e.g., understanding abstract wordings such as “in a sexual way”), possibly creating difficulties when used in younger samples. This issue was brought up by McMaster and colleagues (2002) when they used a modified version of the AAUW among 11- to 13-year-olds. In their discussion the authors suggested that the younger participants (i.e., those in early adolescence) may have had more difficulties than the older participants in responding to the harassment questions, and called for the refinement of measures of peer sexual harassment among early adolescents (McMaster et al., 2002). Another limitation in using the AAUW in early adolescent samples is that the scale, despite its widespread use, has seldom been validated and assessed regarding its underlying dimensions (Dahlqvist et al., 2016; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Ortega et al., 2010).

Research among older adolescents has been somewhat inconsistent in regard to what dimensions of peer sexual harassment have been found when the AAUW has been used (Dahlqvist et al., 2016; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Ortega et al., 2010), and some researchers even suggest that the construct and its underlying dimensions differ between genders (McMaster et al., 2002; Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005). This is an apparent limitation in using the AAUW. Therefore, to be able to advance research on peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence, an essential first step is to develop and evaluate age-appropriate measures of peer sexual harassment.



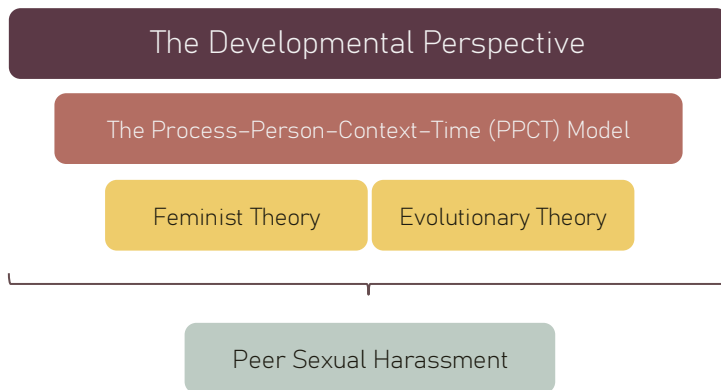
# Theoretical Framework

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The theoretical framework of this thesis will have a hierarchical design, constituted by three theoretical levels: macro-level, mid-level, and specific theories (see Figure 1). Each level is based on the former, proceeding from a more general view of child development into more specific aspects of relevance for the understanding of peer sexual harassment. First, the developmental perspective will be used as a macro-level theory to set the overarching theoretical framework for the thesis, explaining the basis of human development along with unique aspects associated with the transition between childhood and adolescence (ages 10-12 years), also referred to here as early adolescence. Second, Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model will be used as a mid-level theory to explain the processes through which early adolescents' development takes place. Third, feminist theory and evolutionary theory will be used as specific theories to explain particular aspects of sexual harassment behaviors.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

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## The Developmental Perspective

When understanding how peer sexual harassment can occur and affect a developing person's psychological health and functions, the first step is to understand the basis of human development. In early adolescence, several of the most intense developmental changes occurring in a human lifetime are imminent, marking an upcoming shift from childhood into adolescence. Even though human development occurs over an entire lifespan, this thesis, guided by its overarching aim, will mainly focus on the specific phase of the transition between childhood and adolescence.

There are several ways of defining psychological development. In this thesis the American Psychological Association's definition will be used, in which development is defined as "the progressive series of changes in structure, function, and behavior patterns that occur over the lifespan of a human being or other organism" (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Simply put, this means that each part of a human's psychological functions is the effect of what was before, and will in turn affect his or her proceeding development. Even though this emphasizes early life experiences as important, people can change and develop in both positive and negative directions throughout their lives (Bleidorn et al., 2021). However, certain periods in life are more sensitive to influence. This could include, for example, specific periods during the toddler years, or the onset of puberty, when the individual is particularly sensitive to impressions that shape their development. The transition between childhood and adolescence arguably comprises such a period. Negative experiences occurring during such sensitive periods may have a stronger impact on one's development than if they occur during a more stable period in life (Heim & Binder, 2012).

Development is multidimensional, meaning that it occurs within different domains, such as the physical, cognitive, social, or emotional. These domains can develop at different paces and partly in different ways both between and within individuals, and a wide range of individual differences at the same age can still be considered normal. Also, because the different developmental domains are interrelated, changes within one domain can affect other domains (Farmer et al., 2021). For example, physical changes due to pubertal development, including looking more sexually mature, increase one's risk of being a victim of peer sexual harassment (Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b). In

turn, being a victim can cause negative thinking about oneself and insecurity in peer interactions (Kellij et al., 2022), affecting both the individual's social and emotional development. Consequently, a change in the physical domain can affect the cognitive, social, and emotional domains.

In developmental psychology, change and development can occur as well as be described and understood in terms of between-individual differences (i.e., group mean-level differences) and within-individual changes. The majority of analyses reported in the empirical literature have been conducted at the between-individual level, addressing questions such as whether adolescents who experience more sexual harassment than others have more emotional problems. However, the majority (if not all) of psychological theories and hypotheses are concerned with within-individual change. In the current context, an example of within-individual change would be an individual who is exposed to peer sexual harassment subsequently experiencing an increase in emotional problems as a result of the harassment. This lack of empirical studies concerning within-individual change is unfortunate, as the associations on the two levels may differ in terms of both magnitude and sign. Disregarding within-individual change could therefore produce biased estimates and misinterpretations of results (Berry & Willoughby, 2017; Hamaker et al., 2015). For example, observations of a decrease in the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems at the group level will not capture individuals experiencing the opposite change. In addition, as the negative effects of peer sexual harassment seem to occur mainly at the individual level (Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023), the most vulnerable individuals may be overlooked if individual changes are not taken into account. Thus, from a developmental perspective, when studying how child development can be influenced by negative life experiences, such as being a victim of peer sexual harassment, it is essential to determine whether the effects exist on the between- and/or the within-individual level.

### *Development in Early Adolescence*

In the following section, this thesis will review relevant aspects of the developmental processes in the transition from childhood to adolescence in relation to peer sexual harassment, mainly focusing on emotional and social developmental domains. The transition between childhood and adolescence is usually regarded

as encompassing the ages 8 to 12 years (Dunn et al., 2020), and early adolescence the ages 10 to 15 years (Sawyer et al., 2018). Thus, the age group studied in the thesis (ages 10 to 12 years) could be referred to both as being in the transitional age between childhood and adolescence and as early adolescence.

Emotional development follows a curvilinear pattern across the lifespan, with levels of poorer emotional well-being increasing from childhood to adolescence and then decreasing again across adulthood (Lewis, 2018). Early adolescence has been highlighted as a critical period for emotion regulation development (Bell et al., 2018), and emotional regulation along with experiences of positive affect are necessary for good health and quality of life (Bell et al., 2018). Individuals who experience persistently higher levels of negative emotions and/or stronger reactions to stressors are more vulnerable to developing emotional disorders, physical illness, and earlier death compared to their less distressed and more emotionally stable peers (Lewis, 2018). Experiencing emotional problems in early adolescence may therefore be particularly harmful, as this may hinder the development of healthy and effective emotion regulation strategies.

In early adolescence, peer relationships become gradually more important due to the increased time spent with peers at school and an increased wish to become independent from one's parents (Meek & Jahromi, 2018). The cognitive and neurological development that occurs from childhood to adolescence increases one's awareness of the peer group, motivating the child to understand peer group norms and rules for gaining acceptance and avoiding the peer group's rejection (Hazen, 2018). Positive or supportive peer relationships can prevent mental health problems (Mitic et al., 2021), but negative peer relationships or an absence of supportive peer relationships are associated with several negative outcomes, such as social withdrawal (Bond et al., 2007), risk-taking behavior (e.g., early onset of smoking, drinking, and sexual relationships; Kipping et al., 2012), increased risk of juvenile delinquency (Wasserman et al., 2003), and long-term mental health consequences (Lereya et al., 2015).

As children engage in mutual socialization, friends become more similar in attitudes and a more complex understanding of friendship emerges, including mutual instrumental help, emotional support, and loyalty (Hazen, 2018). As cross-gender friendships increase, this enables the progression of several normative developmental functions, such as companionship, intimacy, experimentation with gender-role behaviors, and later, romantic relationships

(Connolly et al., 2013; Grover et al., 2007; Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Friendships also become an important context for the exploration of one's identity, allowing adolescents to discuss concerns they might not feel as comfortable discussing with their parents, such as romantic or sexual interests (Hazen, 2018).

In early adolescence, fitting in and being popular among peers becomes increasingly important. Popularity, as perceived by adolescents themselves, is associated with social impact, such as being visible, powerful, and influential (Hazen, 2018). Individuals who score high on perceived popularity usually set the norms and rules for their closest peer group by using relational aggression to regulate the group norms (Hazen, 2018), for instance through peer sexual harassment. Peer pressure is also found to be a powerful predictor of negative behaviors, and seems to have more impact among younger than older adolescents (Schulenberg & Patrick, 2018).

Finally, emerging pubertal development is one of the more prominent developmental differences between childhood and adolescence. Pubertal development is a hormonally driven process that causes vast bodily and hormonal changes, for instance involving one's height, weight, and secondary sexual characteristics (e.g., breast and muscle development and pubic, body, and facial hair; Stattin & Skoog, 2018). These pubertal changes are called discontinuity in development, whereby new behaviors arise or abrupt changes in development happen to everyone (Bornstein, 2018a, 2018b). The timing and tempo of puberty vary dramatically across individuals, but girls typically begin their pubertal development approximately two years before boys (Benner, 2018). Pubertal development not only changes a child's physical attributes – it also has important implications for their socio-emotional development. The increased hormonal production along with the development of a more sexually mature appearance can influence peer interactions in terms of an increased interest in sexualized behaviors and romantic relationships, as well as more socialization with older peers (Benner, 2018). Together, these aspects may be closely linked to children's involvement in peer sexual harassment. Early pubertal timing in relation to one's peers has, for example, been found to be associated not only with an increased risk of peer sexual harassment victimization but also with offending other peers oneself (Carter et al., 2018; Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2022).

In summary, the transition between childhood and adolescence comprises a sensitive period of development that sees an intensification of one's

development within both social and emotional domains (Somerville, 2013). As this period is critical for the development of complex socio-emotional and cognitive skills that influence later mental health outcomes, it is important to study how negative life experiences, such as being exposed to peer sexual harassment, may be related to emotional outcomes at this transitional age. As what is true on a group mean level may not be true for the individual (Kievit et al., 2013), it is also important to determine whether the effects exist on the between- and/or the within-individual level. Such information is essential for being able to validate and develop theory, as well as develop effective interventions against peer sexual harassment at young ages.

## The Process–Person–Context–Time Model (PPCT)

As the developmental perspective describes the broader aspects of development that occur in early adolescence, a more specific model is needed to understand the processes through which this development takes place. This thesis will use relevant parts of Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time Model (PPCT; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) as a point of departure for understanding how development can take place. Even though the thesis will not be able to address the full PPCT model in relation to peer sexual harassment in an empirical way, it is considered to be a model of value for use as a starting point when understanding what drives child development and how peer interactions, such as peer sexual harassment, can affect this process.

In the 1970s, Uri Bronfenbrenner first presented his ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). In its early versions, its focus was primarily on the mutual interaction between the individual and their environment (e.g., the school or family context) and how changes in the environment affected the development of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Thus, the focus was on ecological and contextual aspects of the developmental process. The model was later evolved and developed into the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006), in which a more complex understanding of human development was formed. The focus shifted to include more of the individual's characteristics (e.g., gender, experience, or physical appearance) and how these characteristics, in conjunction with aspects of the context, impact the processes of development and produce human development.

The principal idea is that who the individual is will affect the environment, and how the environment is and responds to the individual's way of being, along with the time period in which the interaction takes place, will affect the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). The different processes that affect development therefore lie within the individual; within the people, objects, and environments surrounding the individual; and within the historical time period the individual is living in. These processes are not merely additive but simultaneously influence the developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2001).

According to the PPCT model, the component that drives human development is referred to as proximal processes. It considers that development takes place through processes of gradually more complex mutual interactions between an active, evolving biopsychological human and the persons, objects, and symbols in their immediate (i.e., proximal) outer environment. When these interactions are enduring and happen on a rather regular basis, they are referred to as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). An example of a proximal process is the interaction between a child and their peers at school on a regular basis. It is in these interactions that the proximal processes occur and in turn drive the individual's development. Exactly how these proximal processes will affect development varies based on the developing person's characteristics, the environment and context the person exists in, the nature of the developmental outcomes, and the continuities and changes in the social contexts over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). For this reason, sexual harassment between peers occurring in school can affect the proximal processes, changing the course of an individual's developmental path.

Accordingly, the proximal processes are affected by the developing person's characteristics and how these interact with, and influence, the surrounding context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). An example of this could be how an individual dresses and whether or not this is in line with the prevailing gender norms. This type of individual characteristics can create instant expectations among peers and thereby influence their initial interactions and how proximal processes are established (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). Research has found, for example, that looking more sexually mature mediates the link between early pubertal timing and sexual harassment victimization (Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016b). Thus, a person's characteristics of early pubertal timing and looking more sexually mature could influence the surrounding context and increase their likelihood of being sexually harassed, which in turn may

impact their future development. Another individual characteristic could be the developing person's experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). This can be exemplified by a study in the nearby research field of bullying, which found that experiences of peer victimization were associated with an increased risk of peer perpetration (Falla et al., 2022). The authors suggested that this association is influenced by cognitive restructuring, meaning that the victim may develop a skewed perception of their victimization and begin to accept such inappropriate behavior as typical, downplaying its importance and redefining it as a normal aspect of peer relationships. Thus, if someone is a victim of bullying, they are more likely to become a perpetrator themselves as the behavior is often minimized and considered less serious, creating a negative cycle of violence (Falla et al., 2022). This may also be true for peer sexual harassment; thus, for example, overlapping roles between victimization and perpetration may be a result of an individual's initial experience of being a victim. Studying victimization and perpetration in relation to each other could therefore be of great value in understanding what drives the development of peer sexual harassment behaviors.

The next component of the PPCT model that is relevant to this thesis is context, which describes the ecological system that includes the developing individual, where development occurs and is influenced in different ways (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). Contexts are divided into different systems, such as the micro- and macrosystems. The microsystem involves the context where a person spends the most amount of time, such as at school or with peer groups. This is where the proximal processes occur, albeit still influenced by the other systems of context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). Thus, negative peer experiences, such as peer sexual harassment, occurring in the microsystem may have an especially strong impact on development. Several aspects of the microsystem are important when studying peer sexual harassment among youths. Firstly, this harassment is most likely to occur in school (Young et al., 2009). Secondly, peers' norms and attitudes regarding sexual harassment have been found to impact the likelihood that an individual will intervene when witnessing harassment among peers (Nickerson et al., 2023). Lastly, the school-class context, for instance teachers' ability to address peer sexual harassment in the school class, has been found to impact the occurrence of peer sexual harassment (Basile et al., 2016). Thus, taking into account aspects of the microsystem when studying peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and

adolescence is important, as these aspects are likely to affect the proximal processes that drive the individual's development.

The macrosystem instead describes a context on an institutional level, such as the social, education, and legal systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). Examples of such systems are government laws defining sexual harassment, school policy documents regulating how school personnel should act in response to peer sexual harassment, and cultural contexts influencing social attitudes regarding sexual harassment. However, research has found that having school policies against peer sexual harassment is not enough to create change if the values are not integrated into all levels of the school system, including the microsystem (Brown et al., 2023). Therefore, in efforts to understand how peer sexual harassment may influence development among individuals in early adolescence, it is essential to address the microsystem (i.e., the school or classroom).



# Specific Theories of Sexual Harassment

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In the following sections, two of the most dominant specific theories in the field of peer sexual harassment research will be introduced: feminist theory and evolutionary theory. These two perspectives are often perceived as competing, as they offer different explanations for what drives and maintains sexual harassment behaviors. However, in the present thesis the two are considered to contribute different insights of value in understanding the occurrence of peer sexual harassment in early adolescence, and will thus be presented as complementary instead of competing.

## Feminist Perspective of Sexual Harassment

When studying sexual harassment through a feminist lens, it is important to understand how gender and sexuality are assumed to be constructed in the socio-cultural context examined. Using a feminist perspective, sexual harassment can be seen as a phenomenon embedded in a culture of heterosexism and misogyny, with sexual harassment behaviors used as a tool for policing gender conformity or (hetero)sexuality, or as a tool for declaring male dominance (Conroy, 2013). Children as young as four to five years of age have been shown to be more negative toward peers who do not conform to stereotypical gender expressions, especially non-conforming boys (Kwan et al., 2020). Feminist scholars emphasize that these deeply rooted structures have enabled a normalization of sexual harassment behaviors, making it difficult to take action against them, for example in schools (Conroy, 2013). Further, a study conducted on U.S. ten-year-olds presented that those who felt pressure from peers to conform to traditional gender roles were more likely to agree with sexist comments about another child (Schroeder & Liben, 2021). Hence, from the feminist perspective, understanding the gender structures in society is an important step in disentangling the occurrence of and reasons for peer sexual harassment in early adolescence.

*Policing Gender Conformity and (Hetero)sexuality*

The dominant gender norms in a society have a strong impact on how its people behave and relate to each other. In the context addressed here, the historically – and still prevailing – structure is based on a clear division between masculinity and femininity with male dominance in focus. This gender structure aims to teach boys to be tough, aggressive, and dominant, while girls are taught to value their physical appearance and seek out male attention (Keddie, 2009; Rogers et al., 2021). Through this feminist lens, sexual harassment in adolescence – at least when boys are the perpetrators and girls the victims – can be seen as a way of following culturally sanctioned scripts for how to behave socially in relation to one's sexuality and gender (Li & Craig, 2020; Robinson, 2005; Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020). This draws attention to a complexity associated with peer sexual harassment: At the same time as the exposure can be experienced as unwelcome and troubling, it can also be flattering and validate parts of, for example, girls' femininity. Further, even though, for instance, a boy may think it is wrong to sexually harass a peer, doing it anyway could strengthen his status within the male peer group (Brown et al., 2020; Keddie, 2009). This duality potentially distinguishes peer sexual harassment from other types of harassment or bullying, and emphasizes a complexity associated with the experience of being involved. However, this explanation assumes a cross-gender harassment whereby boys are perpetrators and girls victims, which is not always the case. Rolfe and Shroeder (2020) point to findings in which girls instead sexually harass boys, and suggest that this may indicate a shift in hegemonic masculinity whereby girls are becoming less and less accepting of gender cultural norms.

Another aspect of peer sexual harassment to consider involves boys or girls sexually harassing someone of their own gender, referred to as same-gender sexual harassment. Because of the strong gender norms in today's society, using peer sexual harassment can be seen as a powerful tool for asserting power over one's peers (Meyer, 2008). Same-gender harassment between boys can, for example, establish a social hierarchy by emasculating other boys through the use of homophobic name-calling (Hlavka, 2017). Meanwhile, same-gender harassment between girls can instead be seen as a way to socially exclude someone for not following normative gender behaviors (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006; Leaper & Brown, 2018). As girls are judged more harshly in terms of sexual activity and promiscuity (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Vrangalova et al., 2014), an efficient way

to degrade a girl's dignity and socially exclude her could be to spread sexual rumors about her.

Empirical research has shown that youths who deviate from the dominant gender norms are at greater risk of being victims of peer sexual harassment than are those who do not (Mitchell et al., 2014). Especially homophobic sexual harassment is used to attack those who are, or are perceived to be, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer (Meyer, 2008). This does not necessarily have to do with the targeted peer's actual sexual orientation, but rather with their gender expressions or not conforming to dominant gender norms (Poteat & Russell, 2013; Valido et al., 2022). Examples of this include a boy who dresses in pink being called gay, or a girl who does not use makeup being called a dyke. In this way, through peer sexual harassment such as homophobic name-calling, the strictly regulated gender norms that dominate society can hinder young people from freely exploring and expressing their own sexual identity and gender.

### *Male Dominance and Masculinity Norms*

According to the feminist perspective, peer sexual harassment can also be understood as a way to assert male dominance by stating power and control over one's peers, specifically female ones (Mahalik et al., 2003). An example of this is adversarial labels, such as slut or whore, being used to regulate girls' sexual behaviors (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). Male dominance is a part of stereotypical masculine norms, meaning that there are social rules that boys and men should act in a certain way (e.g., be strong, aggressive, muscular, tall, dominant, and heterosexual) so that they reinforce their status, or ranking, over girls (Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). These masculine norms can be present on a micro level (such as between peers in school) or on a macro level (such as the gender structures, norms, and policies in society at large). There may also be cultural differences in the extent to which men conform to these masculine norms. As this thesis uses a Swedish sample, how men conform in Sweden is of particular interest. A study by Holmqvist Gattario and colleagues (2015) found that Swedish men scored lower on the masculinity norm "power over women" compared to men from other Western countries, which may be linked to Sweden generally being seen as a more gender-equal country (EIGE, 2023). This might imply, from a feminist perspective, that peer sexual harassment in a Swedish context (i.e., as addressed

in the present thesis) is not as prevalent as in countries with less gender equality. However, peer sexual harassment is highly prevalent in a Swedish context as well (Dahlqvist et al., 2016; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021, 2022), suggesting that the stereotypical masculine norms may prevail nonetheless.

## Evolutionary Perspective of Sexual Harassment

Another perspective that offers different explanations for peer sexual harassment is the evolutionary perspective. In line with a feminist perspective, this perspective views certain aspects of sexual violence as a result of hostile masculinity norms. However, in contrast to a feminist perspective, the evolutionary perspective also views several of the psychological processes associated with sexual harassment as a result of evolutionary adaptations (such as sexual preferences or gaining status), rather than merely being a result of socialization or cultural influences (Volk et al., 2012).

### *Sexual Reproduction*

When peer sexual harassment is understood from an evolutionary perspective, sexual reproduction is a central concept to address as it is seen as a core aspect driving sexual harassment behaviors (Pina et al., 2009). Scholars within the field who advocate this perspective believe that there are fundamental gender differences in how females and males approach a potential sexual partner, with men having gained more reproductive benefits from pursuing short-term sexual partners over evolutionary time (Hughes et al., 2020; Trivers, 1972). Kennair and colleagues (2009) found that both men and women do tend to seek long-term sexual partners to the same degree; however, men are more likely than women to seek short-term sexual partners, vary between sexual partners, and consent to sex after a shorter amount of time. Because of these differences, men are also more likely to misinterpret ambivalent cues of sexual interest from others, also called sexual misperception bias (Bendixen, 2014), which may explain why boys are overrepresented as perpetrators of peer sexual harassment in adolescence.

*Peer Sexual Harassment from an Evolutionary Perspective*

According to the evolutionary perspective, sexual harassment in early adolescence is closely linked to children's sexual maturation and pubertal development. As mentioned earlier, empirical studies have found that early maturation relative to one's same-gender peers is likely to increase one's risk of being the target of unwanted sexual attention (Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b). When a child matures within the sexual and pubertal domains, sexual exploration becomes more prevalent, increasing sexualized behaviors (James et al., 2012; Schulz & Sisk, 2016) and thereby also increasing their risk of being a victim of peer sexual harassment (Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b).

Within the evolutionary framework, sexual harassment is believed to be comprised of two relatively distinct types of behavior: derogation and undesired solicitation (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017). Derogation is a type of indirect aggression with the goal of reducing the attractiveness of sexual competitors. Studies have shown derogation to be a successful strategy in intrasexual competition (i.e., between members of the same sex) to obtain access to romantic and sexual opportunities, especially later in adolescence (Lee et al., 2018; Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018; Volk et al., 2015). These derogative behaviors targeting sexual competitors can include degrading comments about someone's body parts, sexual orientation, and promiscuity, as well as sexual rumoring, and have been shown to be more typical in sexual harassment toward same-gender peers (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017; Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018).

Unwanted solicitation, on the other hand, can be described as a subtype of aggressive behavior in which the perpetrator's intentions primarily involve giving signals of sexual interest, such as making sexual requests, displaying or sending pictures with sexual content, and making comments on someone's looks, while the behavior is unwanted by the recipient. These behaviors are more common in sexual harassment directed at cross-gender peers (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017).

When viewing peer sexual harassment from both a feminist and an evolutionary theoretical perspective, it becomes apparent that peer sexual harassment in childhood and adolescence is a complex and multifaceted problem. Both perspectives highlight the need to consider different aspects of peer sexual harassment when trying to understand the mechanisms behind it, such as the type of sexual harassment (e.g., derogation or undesired solicitation), the gender

of those involved, and the social context surrounding the harassment (e.g., current and historical gender norms). What these different perspectives also do is further emphasize the need to understand peer sexual harassment from a developmental perspective, for instance that pubertal development can influence and create differences in the mechanisms behind the occurrence of peer sexual harassment at different ages.

# Peer Sexual Harassment

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In the following section, knowledge about peer sexual harassment derived from empirical studies will be presented. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the research field of peer sexual harassment among children and adolescents. However, research on peer sexual harassment in the early years of adolescence is scarce, and knowledge about this early occurrence is yet to be studied. The following literature review will therefore mainly use knowledge from research conducted on mid- to late adolescents as a point of departure when presenting what is known about peer sexual harassment among youths.

## Roles

Peer sexual harassment involves different roles, for example those of victim, perpetrator, and witness. To be able to understand this harassment from different perspectives, all three roles need to be considered. Despite this, most studies on peer sexual harassment in adolescence focus on the role of victim, while very few have explored those of perpetrator or witness. This is unfortunate, as understanding the role of peer sexual harassment perpetrator could offer important insights into how those who perpetrate the harassment are affected by it, which in turn could inform interventions targeting peer sexual harassment. Also, as this harassment most commonly occurs in the presence of peers (Lichty & Campbell, 2012), understanding how those who witness it are affected could offer important insights into what may hinder or enable the occurrence of it. As witnesses have been shown to exert a powerful impact on situations through their actions and reactions in the closely related field of bullying (Paull et al., 2012), this may apply to peer sexual harassment as well. Against this background, the current thesis will address this harassment in early adolescence from the perspective of three roles: victimization, perpetration, and witnessing.

## Prevalence

Looking into the prevalence of different roles of peer sexual harassment, an Australian study of 11- to 19-year-olds found that 42.5% of boys and 40.0% of girls reported sexual harassment victimization in the previous school term (Lei et al., 2020). A Canadian study of 10- to 14-year-olds found similar numbers, with 38.5% of boys, 38.5% of girls, and 81.8% of gender minority students reporting victimization in the previous month (Li & Craig, 2020). Regarding perpetration, a U.S. study of 11- to 13-year-olds found that 29.9% of boys and 20.3% of girls reported perpetration (Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020) and another American study of 14- to 15-year-olds showed that 24% of boys and 14% of girls reported perpetration in the past year (Stroem et al., 2022). Regarding witnessing peer sexual harassment, a Canadian study of 10- to 14-year-olds found that 62.4% of boys, 65.8% of girls, and 81.8% of gender minority students reported witnessing in the previous month (Li & Craig, 2020), and an American study of 11- to 15-year-olds found that almost all students (96%) reported witnessing during the current school year (Lichty & Campbell, 2012). In addition, verbal forms are highlighted as the most common type of peer sexual harassment throughout early to late adolescence (11- to 19-year-olds; Espelage et al., 2016; Lei et al., 2020; Lichty & Campbell, 2012; McMaster et al., 2002).

As emphasized in both feminist and evolutionary theories, a central aspect to consider when studying the prevalence of the roles of peer sexual harassment is the issue of gender. Historically, the assumption has been that more girls than boys are victims of peer sexual harassment, and this has been supported in some previous studies among adolescents (Greenwald, 2004; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Ormerod et al., 2008). However, more recent research has instead found that boys and girls are equally exposed to peer sexual harassment victimization (Li & Craig, 2020), or even that boys are more victimized than girls (Lei et al., 2020). The few studies on peer sexual harassment among 10- to 12-year-olds specifically found that boys reported more peer sexual harassment victimization than girls (Petersen & Hyde, 2009), or that boys and girls were equally victimized (Lindberg et al., 2007). A possible explanation for these inconsistent findings could be that boys and girls are exposed to different kinds of victimization and that measures of peer sexual harassment do not always capture all forms. For instance, studies have found that boys are more likely to be verbally harassed, specifically involving homophobic name-calling (Espelage et al., 2016; Rinehart et

al., 2020; Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020), while girls are more likely to be physically harassed or be the subjects of sexual rumor spreading (Crowley & Cornell, 2020; Espelage et al., 2016). Other possible explanations for the inconsistent findings between early adolescence and later adolescence could be that gender differences are less profound in the younger ages and do not emerge until later in adolescence (McMaster et al., 2002), or that societal changes in gender dynamics have historically changed (Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020). Regarding perpetrators of peer sexual harassment, research in adolescence (also including 11- to 12-year-olds) is more unanimous in showing that boys are overrepresented as perpetrators compared to girls (e.g., Lichty & Campbell, 2012; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010), which is similar to what has been found in other fields of peer victimization research such as that of bullying (Álvarez-García et al., 2015). The only studies focusing on witnessing peer sexual harassment in adolescence (also including 10- to 12-year-olds) found no gender differences (Li & Craig, 2020; Lichty & Campbell, 2012), indicating that peer sexual harassment across adolescence occurs in the presence of both boys and girls.

Another aspect to consider regarding gender and prevalence is the prevalence of sexual harassment occurring between same-gender peers (i.e., same-gender harassment) or between opposite-gender peers (i.e., cross-gender harassment; McMaster et al., 2002), as these different types may offer different explanations for the harassment. For example, same-gender harassment could be explained as a form of aggression with the aim of increasing one's status among peers (McMaster et al., 2002), or a derogative tactic for reducing the attractiveness of sexual competitors (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017). Cross-gender harassment could instead be understood as a sexually motivated behavior that leads to an immature attempt to express sexual interest (McMaster et al., 2002; Pellegrini, 2001; Schnoll et al., 2015), or a way of consolidating the socially constructed concepts of heterosexual masculinity and femininity (Conroy, 2013). Regarding the prevalence of same- and cross-gender harassment, empirical studies have found that boys were more likely than girls to report same-gender sexual harassment victimization (Espelage et al., 2016; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Schnoll et al., 2015), but also that there were no gender differences in cross-gender sexual harassment (Petersen & Hyde, 2009).

Finally, research has found an overlap between the peer sexual harassment roles, suggesting that young people may participate in multiple roles at the same time. Specifically, in a Canadian sample of 11- to 13-year-olds, 78% of

perpetrators were also victims and 56% of victims were also perpetrators (McMaster et al., 2002). Another study found positive correlations between victimization and witnessing, with a .60 correlation for boys and a .51 correlation for girls (Li & Craig, 2020). Still, research on the overlap of roles (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing) in peer sexual harassment among youths is understudied, and to my knowledge no studies have yet examined the overlap between all three roles. Examining early adolescents' involvement in all three roles is important, however, as overlaps indicate the importance of understanding the social and contextual aspects of peer sexual harassment in addition to individual characteristics (e.g., gender). Examining all three roles could therefore add knowledge about the context of peer sexual harassment on both a micro and a macro level, including aspects such as peer, school, or societal norms regarding sexual harassment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006).

## Peer Sexual Harassment and Psychological Well-Being

Being sexually harassed by peers may be especially difficult during adolescence as peer relationships play a particularly salient role in adolescents' psychosocial development. Especially during early adolescence, being accepted and liked by peers is a main concern (Somerville, 2013); thus, being treated negatively by peers (such as being sexually harassed) at this age may be particularly hurtful and distressing. In the literature on adolescents, the association between peer sexual harassment victimization and higher levels of emotional problems, such as depression or anxiety, is well established (Rinehart et al., 2020; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023). However, empirical research has also found associations with other aspects of psychological well-being, such as higher levels of body shame (Lindberg et al., 2007), self-harm behaviors (Bucchianeri et al., 2014), and suicidal thoughts (Chiodo et al., 2009). In fact, when the effects of peer sexual harassment victimization and bullying victimization in schools were compared, sexual harassment appeared to damage students' school engagement, alienate them from teachers, and negatively affect their academic achievement to a higher degree than bullying (Gruber & Fineran, 2016). Even after accounting for baseline levels of internalizing symptoms, such as emotional problems, longitudinal studies suggest that sexual harassment victimization increases the risk of developing emotional problems over time (Chiodo et al., 2009; Hatchel et al., 2018;

Petersen & Hyde, 2013; Skoog et al., 2016). This implies just how detrimental peer sexual harassment may be to young people's psychological well-being. However, it is important to note that the direction of causality between peer sexual harassment and psychological well-being is not always unidirectional but can instead be rather complex. This is indicated by recent studies showing a reciprocal association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems, suggesting not only that victimization affects the developmental process of emotional problems but also that emotional problems affect the development of sexual harassment victimization across time (Murchison et al., 2023; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023). Hence, adolescents who are already vulnerable and experience emotional problems may be seen as easy targets among their peers, increasing their risk of being exposed to peer sexual harassment. As a result, their lives may become even more emotionally stressful. It is important to consider this reciprocity when studying sexual harassment at an early age, as an assumption of causality can lead to misleading conclusions.

The most common role within peer sexual harassment that has been studied in relation to psychological well-being is that of victimization. Less is known about how perpetrating and/or witnessing peer sexual harassment is related to psychological well-being, as research on the two roles in adolescence is insufficient. The few studies that were found regarding perpetration show that perpetrating adolescents reported higher levels of anger (Leemis et al., 2019), aggressive behavior (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018), depression, conduct disorder, and substance use (Ngo et al., 2018) compared to non-perpetrators. The association between witnessing peer sexual harassment and psychological well-being is the least explored, but it seems that witnesses of peer sexual harassment report more psychological distress (Lichty & Campbell, 2012) and depressive symptoms (Li & Craig, 2020) compared to non-witnesses. Thus, emotional problems appear to be associated with all three roles; however, as no single study has included all three roles, the unique contribution of each role in the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems is still unknown.

Associations between peer sexual harassment and psychological well-being may also differ by gender, as some studies show that girls who are victims report more emotional problems than boys do (Dahlqvist et al., 2016; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021). Previous research has suggested that this could be due to girls experiencing more severe sexual harassment than boys (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Ormerod et al., 2008), but also that there are different standards for boys and

girls in terms of sexual activity and promiscuity (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Vranaglova et al., 2014), with girls who violate gender norms possibly suffering greater consequences than boys (e.g., having more sexual-content rumors spread about them; Malamut et al., 2018). In addition, there are studies indicating that girls may be more vulnerable to stress than boys are (e.g. Oldehinkel & Bouma, 2011). As being exposed to peer sexual harassment can be a stressful event, this may contribute to girls being more vulnerable than boys to developing emotional symptoms when exposed.

One major gap in the literature is the lack of studies examining the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems on a within-individual level. According to a study by Skoog and Kapetanovic (2023), it is on the within-individual level that the causal processes between emotional problems and sexual harassment occur. This suggests that empirical research only studying between-individual differences may be biased in its reporting and thereby fail to discover important links between exposure to peer sexual harassment and poorer well-being. Thus, an important opportunity for future research is to study associations between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems on the within-individual level as well.

Even though there is still much to be discovered regarding the associations between the different roles of peer sexual harassment and well-being, how gender might affect these associations, and whether the associations also occur on a within-individual level, current knowledge indicates just how detrimental peer sexual harassment may be to young people's psychological well-being. This further emphasizes the need to increase our knowledge about how exposure to peer sexual harassment occurring in critical windows of development – such as the transition from childhood into adolescence – is associated with poorer well-being, as exposure during this period may have an even stronger impact on one's development than if it were to occur during a more stable period in life (Heim & Binder, 2012).

## Context

According to Bronfenbrenner's PPCT Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), who individuals are will affect their environment, and how the environment is and responds to their way of being will affect the individual. Therefore,

when studying sexual harassment among young people, research needs to include not only individual psychological characteristics but also contextual aspects of the environment in which these young people develop. Empirical studies have shown that peer sexual harassment most commonly occurs in a school setting in the presence of peers (Young et al., 2009), for example in the hallways, classrooms, gym locker rooms, gym class, lunchroom, and outside the school during recess (Espelage et al., 2016). In early adolescence, students spend most of their day at school with the same group of students (i.e., sharing the same classroom and teacher), which is why aspects of the school-class environment are of particular interest when studying peer sexual harassment in early adolescence. Emerging research suggests that school-class aspects such as fewer students in the class, positive relationships between teachers and students (Attar-Schwartz, 2009), and teachers addressing issues of gender inequity and positive healthy relationships in the school class (Basile et al., 2016) can reduce the occurrence of peer sexual harassment in classes.

Given the importance of “fitting in” and gaining social capital in the peer group, social norms related to peer sexual harassment can be powerful in regulating early adolescents’ behaviors and experiences, for example within the class (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Cialdini and Trost (1998) proposed the terms *descriptive* and *injunctive* norms to describe an individual’s perception of how common a certain behavior is in the peer group (*descriptive* norms), and of how approved (or disapproved) the behavior is among peers (*injunctive* norms). The degree to which adolescents perceive that peer sexual harassment is common, approved, and normalized in their peer group or within the school class may have an impact on whether or not they engage in it themselves, as well as on the emotional experience of being involved. For instance, if sexual harassment occurs regularly in the classroom, victims may view it as normalized, less serious, and unrelated to them personally, resulting in a weaker association between being a victim and experiencing negative emotions. On the other hand, the normalization of peer sexual harassment in a classroom could hinder teachers from intervening when it occurs (Conroy, 2013; Rahimi & Liston, 2009), causing the victims to feel alone and making it more difficult for them to seek help, resulting in a stronger association between being a victim and experiencing negative emotions. Similar processes may also be true for perpetration and witnessing. For example, if sexual harassment occurs regularly in a classroom, adolescents may think of their own perpetration as less serious, which may decrease the negative

emotions associated with their behavior. In reference to witnessing, a study by Li and Craig (2020) discovered that girls who experienced sexual harassment by peers and more often witnessed others being victims of peer sexual harassment reported fewer depressive symptoms. They argued that those who witness peer sexual harassment more often may be better at contextualizing their experience within a culture in which this harassment is common, instead of attributing it to themselves. Thus, the context surrounding the peer sexual harassment, such as the classroom context, may play an important part in the individual's experience of it, which in turn could impact the psychological well-being of those who are exposed.

## Current Knowledge Gaps

The above review of the literature outlines the increasing empirical understanding of peer sexual harassment in adolescence, with some aspects more firmly established than others. In summary, peer sexual harassment among adolescents is common, exposure to peer sexual harassment in adolescence is associated with increased levels of emotional distress, gender is important, and contextual aspects (e.g., classroom norms) matter. Despite this increased understanding, however, there is still much to explore.

The most prominent gap in the literature is the lack of studies addressing peer sexual harassment in the transition from childhood to adolescence, a time when peer relationships may have a particularly strong impact on one's psychosocial development. How exposure to peer sexual harassment may impact one's development at this age is therefore still unknown. However, a critical obstacle to advancing research on peer sexual harassment at this age is that there are no existing measures of peer sexual harassment designed for children aged 10–12 years. Another gap in the literature is the fact that no study to date has included all three roles of peer sexual harassment (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing). Thus, there is no knowledge as to the unique contributions of the different roles in the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems. Many studies on peer sexual harassment in adolescence have also overlooked the fact that students can be separated in different classrooms. Therefore, potential differences due to contextual aspects of the classroom in both the prevalence of peer sexual harassment and its associations may have

been neglected. Lastly, most empirical research does not employ analytical approaches that can determine whether the effects of the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems exist on the between- or the within-individual level. Consequently, knowledge about within-individual change is scarce. This is unfortunate, as it has been found that the effects on the between- and within-individual levels are confounded (Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023); thus, conclusions from previous research might be based on biased estimates. This thesis aims to advance the field of knowledge by addressing these gaps in knowledge.



# Summary of Studies

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## Overall Aim

The overarching aim of this thesis is to address peer sexual harassment in the developmentally sensitive period of the transition from childhood to adolescence. More specifically, the aim is to advance the field of knowledge in three respects, called for due to the current gaps in knowledge. First, a measurement tool developed to capture peer sexual harassment in the transition from childhood to adolescence (ages 10 to 12 years) will be evaluated. Second, to enhance knowledge about peer sexual harassment in the transition from childhood to adolescence, peer sexual harassment prevalence, roles, classroom occurrence, and associations with emotional problems among ten-year-olds will be studied. Third, peer sexual harassment victimization in relation to emotional problems will be studied across time, also separating between-individual, within-individual, and within-school-class variability. Together, these studies will provide empirical knowledge that will advance the field of peer sexual harassment research in a developmentally important period of individuals' lives, namely the transition from childhood to adolescence.

## Design and General Methods

### *The PRISE Project*

All articles presented in this thesis were written within the Peer Relations In School from an Ecological perspective (PRISE) project, led by Professor Therése Skoog (Skoog et al., 2019). The project was funded by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (reference number 2018-00667, 3,930,000 SEK). The funding body has no role in the design of the studies, the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data, or the reporting. The project has

been ethically approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reference number 2019-02755). The PRISE project has a three-year longitudinal design, and data were collected annually in Grades 4 (T1) to 6 (T3) from one cohort of students via questionnaires. T1 data collection was conducted from November 2019 through February 2020, T2 data collection was conducted from November 2020 through February 2021, and T3 data collection was conducted from November 2021 through February 2022.

### *Participants*

Participants in the PRISE project were from 63 classes and 29 middle schools located in the western parts of Sweden. At T1, the participants were comprised of 997 fourth-graders ( $M$  age = 10.0,  $SD$  = 0.3, range 9-11 years), including 478 boys, 511 girls, six participants who categorized themselves as “other”, and two participants who did not report gender. At T2, the participants were comprised of 966 fifth-graders ( $M$  age = 10.9,  $SD$  = .29, range 9-13 years), including 463 boys, 489 girls, nine participants who categorized themselves as “other”, and five participants who did not report gender. At T3, the participants were comprised of 879 sixth-graders ( $M$  age = 12.0,  $SD$  = .29, range 10-13 years), including 429 boys, 429 girls, 20 participants who categorized themselves as “other”, and one participant who did not report gender. Unfortunately, as only a few participants reported a gender other than boy or girl, this group could not be considered in the analyses of the included studies. In total, 685 students (69% of the original sample) participated in all three waves of data collection, 295 (30% of the original sample) in two waves, and 111 (11% of the original sample) in one wave. At T1, most participants (93%) were Swedish-born and about a third (29%) had at least one parent born outside Sweden. About a fourth had parents who were separated/divorced (23%). At T2, most participants (94%) were Swedish-born and about a third (30%) had at least one parent born outside Sweden. About a fourth had parents who were separated/divorced (25%). At T3, most participants (93%) were Swedish-born and about a third (29%) had at least one parent born outside Sweden. About a fourth had parents who were separated/divorced (26%). Socio-economic status (SES) was measured by asking participants whether they had their own room, with 86% at T1, 89% at T2, and 92% at T3

reporting that they did. Measuring SES this way when using self-report surveys among children is supported in the literature (Quon & McGrath, 2014).

### *Procedure*

***Recruitment.*** Schools were recruited in the western parts of Sweden during the autumn of 2019. An invitation was sent to principals of middle schools (i.e., Swedish Grades 4-6; students aged 10–12 years) in the region until the goal of  $N > 1000$  participating students was reached. We selected schools of different sizes located in urban, suburban, and rural areas to capture a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The sample size,  $N > 1000$ , was based on conventional calculations (Cohen, 1988), aiming for 80% power, .05 alpha, the ability to detect small effect sizes, and using more than ten predictors (Miles & Shevlin, 2001). The size further accounts for some attrition (10%) that might occur over the study period. Participating students had to submit active consent from their guardians. Information about the study was sent to guardians via post and/or the schools' own digital platforms. Some guardians were also contacted by telephone and/or text messaging.

***Data collection T1.*** Questionnaires were collected at school during regular school hours. The survey, filled out online (Qualtrics), took 20–60 minutes to complete. One or two trained researchers from the project visited the classes to administer the survey, and were available for questions during class. An introduction to the survey was given by the same researcher to all classes participating in the study. A brief introduction was given about private body parts, as the questions about sexual harassment experiences included this terminology. The students were told to only report situations that had happened against their will, and only situations that had occurred in Grade 4. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could skip questions or stop participating at any point. Each student was given an ID code generated by the research team. The code key is only accessible to authorized personnel in the project. The students were informed that no unauthorized person would have access to their answers, and that the results would be presented in a way so that no individuals could be identified. Each participating class received 1,500 SEK. Students who did not participate in the study worked on regular school tasks assigned by the teacher during the data collection.

*Data collection T2 and T3.* Just after the T1 data collection was completed, in March 2020 a pandemic (COVID-19) was declared, imposing societal restrictions on how data could be collected. Consequently, it was no longer possible to visit the schools to collect data, even though Swedish students aged 10–12 years attended school as usual during the pandemic. Instead, data collection at T2 and T3 was conducted using digital tools without researchers from the project visiting the schools. Teachers received information and material (checklist, links to the questionnaire, and ID codes) a few weeks before data collection so they could distribute the survey. ID codes were sent to the schools in a joint package, but in individual envelopes for all participants to maintain confidentiality. To allow participants to ask questions during the data collection, a chat function was developed along with Andreas Segerberg, Research Coordinator at the Department of Psychology at the University of Gothenburg. This function was integrated into the survey so that participants were able to ask trained researchers from the project questions about the questionnaire when they were filling it out. All classes had a scheduled time for participants to complete the questionnaire so that the integrated chat could be staffed. The introduction to the survey was pre-recorded by a researcher from the project and included the same information as at T1, with additional information about the integrated chat. All participants watched the introduction video in groups or individually just before completing the questionnaire. At both time points, each participating class received 1,500 SEK.

## Study I

A critical obstacle to the advancement of research into peer sexual harassment in late childhood is that there are no existing measures of peer sexual harassment designed for children aged 10–12 years. The purpose of the first study was to test a new scale consisting of developmentally informed items, the Peer Sexual Harassment Scale-Child (PSH-C), designed to capture peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence in the school context. To capture the different roles in peer sexual harassment, the PSH-C examines this harassment from the perspectives of victim, perpetrator, and witness, covering different forms of sexual harassment (i.e., physical, verbal, and visual). Using the

PSH-C for the first time, this study tested the scale's construct validity, internal consistency, response rate, convergent validity, and factor structure.

### *Method*

In Study I, data from the first wave of data collection in the PRISE project were used. The PSH-C was developed based on previous literature on peer sexual harassment in late childhood/early adolescence (e.g., AAUW, 2001; Dahlqvist et al., 2016, McMaster et al., 2002) and in close collaboration with middle school teachers, psychotherapists, and clinical psychologists working with children, as well as researchers with expertise in child sexuality and peer victimization. The scale consists of six core items aimed at capturing six different peer sexual harassment experiences in late childhood (age 10–12 years) at school, including verbal, visual, and physical forms. The wording of these items was then adjusted into three subscales to capture the roles of peer sexual harassment victimization, perpetration, and witnessing (18 items in total; see Supplemental materials for the original Swedish version of the scale).

To evaluate the convergent validity of the subscale of peer sexual harassment victimization, a scale assessing general peer victimization was used (Lunde et al., 2006; Rigby, 1999). To evaluate the convergent validity of the subscale for peer sexual harassment perpetration, a scale assessing general externalizing behaviors was used (Lundh et al., 2008). As no comparable measure was used for the subscale measuring witnessing, its convergent validity could not be evaluated.

All statistical analyses were conducted in R, version 4.0.2 (R Core Team, 2020). To control for the latent factor of peer sexual harassment as an overarching construct for the three subscales (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing), a three-factor confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using the different roles as factors. For a first evaluation of the PSH-C's factor structure, we used an exploratory structural equation model-within-confirmatory factor analysis (ESEM-within-CFA) approach as described in Marsh and colleagues (2014). A total of three ESEM-within-CFAs were conducted, one for each subscale (victimization, perpetration, witnessing). To further evaluate the factor structure of the PSH-C indicated by the ESEM-within-CFA, and to test for gender invariance, we used CFA with the WLSMV as an estimator. Again, a

total of three CFAs were conducted, one for each subscale (victimization, perpetration, witnessing). When gender invariance was tested for, the analysis could not be computed for the subscale perpetration due to the absence of girls reporting some of the higher frequencies of this role (i.e., a few times, many times). Therefore, gender invariance was only tested for the victimization and witnessing subscales.

## *Results*

Findings from Study I showed that the PSH-C displayed good psychometric properties, supporting the scale's ability to capture peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence. Support was found for the convergent validity of the PSH-C subscales measuring peer sexual harassment victimization and perpetration, with victimization displaying a moderate to strong positive correlation with general peer victimization and perpetration displaying a small to moderate positive correlation with general externalizing behaviors. Exploratory structural equation analyses suggested a two-factor structure, which was confirmed by confirmatory factor analyses: 1) direct verbal sexual aggression, and 2) direct physical sexual harassment, verbal comments and jokes, and visual sexual harassment. The factor structure that was found differed from what has been found in previous research on adolescents: It was not divided based on physical sexual harassment or non-physical sexual harassment (Ortega et al., 2010; Vega-Gea et al., 2016; Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005), indicating that the peer sexual harassment construct may differ between early and later adolescence. Further, no gender differences were found in how boys and girls understood and responded to the questions, except for one item on the subscales of victimization and witnessing that measured unwanted kissing or hugging, suggesting that the threshold for girls to respond once or more on this item is lower than for boys. As previous research on adolescents has suggested that the construct of peer sexual harassment may be different for boys and girls (McMaster et al., 2002; Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005), our finding may indicate that gender differences are less profound in late childhood/early adolescence.

## Study II

The purpose of the second study was to further explore peer sexual harassment (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing) in the transition between childhood and adolescence by using the PSH-C and the two-factor structure found in Study I (direct verbal sexual aggression; and direct physical sexual harassment, verbal comments and jokes, and visual sexual harassment – henceforth referred to as “general sexual harassment”). As research on peer sexual harassment among ten-year-olds is scarce, the first objective was to study whether ten-year-old boys and girls differ in their levels of self-reported peer sexual harassment victimization, perpetration, and/or witnessing. The second objective was to study how frequently ten-year-olds report involvement in more than one peer sexual harassment role. Further, as no single study to date has included all three roles, a third objective was to examine the association between the three roles (divided by the two factors) and emotional problems, in order to detect unique contributions of each role in relation to emotional problems. In addition, as both gender and the occurrence of sexual harassment in the classroom context have been suggested to impact the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems (Li & Craig, 2020; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021), moderation effects of gender and class level of witnessing peer sexual harassment as a measure of classroom context were added to the model.

*Method*

Like Study I, Study II used data from the first wave of data collection in the PRISE project. Peer sexual harassment was measured using the PSH-C (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing), and emotional problems were measured using the Swedish self-report version of the emotional symptoms subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Lundh et al., 2008). To measure class level of witnessing peer sexual harassment, the class mean of witnessing was calculated for each class using the original PSH-C witnessing subscale.

All statistical analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics version 26 and in R version 4.0.2 (R Core Team, 2020). To analyze the data, percentages of victimization, perpetration, and witnessing (and overlaps between the three) were calculated on both an individual and a school-class level. Gender

differences were calculated using chi square tests. Two linear mixed-effects models (one for direct sexual verbal aggression and one for general sexual harassment) were used, with the data structured based on students (Level 1) nested in classes (Level 2). Emotional problems were predicted by level of involvement in peer sexual harassment (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing). The interaction effect of gender was added for all three roles (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing), and the class mean of witnessing was added as an interaction effect variable.

### *Results*

Results showed that 45% of the participants reported victimization through, 17% perpetration of, and 60% witnessing sexual harassment, with vast overlaps between roles. Classroom occurrence of victimization ranged from 11% to 76%, perpetration from 0% to 46%, and witnessing from 14% to 94%. The most prevalent type of peer sexual harassment, regardless of role, was direct verbal sexual aggression.

More boys than girls (39% boys, 30% girls) reported being victims of direct verbal sexually aggressive forms of peer sexual harassment. Additionally, more boys than girls reported perpetration, regardless of form (verbal 19% boys, 7% girls; general 11% boys, 7% girls). No gender differences were found between boys and girls in reporting general victimization, or any of the witnessing forms. Both peer sexual harassment victimization and witnessing were related to more emotional problems, and this was true for both boys and girls. However, victimized girls reported more emotional problems than victimized boys, and the effect sizes were the strongest for the victimization role. Verbal sexually aggressive forms of perpetration were related to fewer emotional problems for both boys and girls. However, girls who perpetrated reported fewer emotional problems compared to perpetrating boys, and this was true regardless of form. Associations between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems varied across classrooms, indicating that the association was stronger in some classrooms than others. Our findings highlight the occurrence of peer sexual harassment in younger ages and confirm its association with emotional problems, which has been found in research among older adolescents, especially in regard to the victimization role. Also, as the association between peer sexual harassment and

emotional problems seems to vary across classrooms, our study emphasizes an ecological perspective when addressing it in school.

## Study III

The third study was designed to draw from findings in both Studies I and II, studying the victimization role in relation to emotional problems across time, as this role displayed the strongest effect sizes of the three roles in Study II. Also, the possible bias presented in previous studies not separating between-individual differences from within-individual processes was taken into account. Thus, the purpose of the third study was to longitudinally examine both within-individual and between-individual variability in the development of the association between peer sexual harassment victimization and emotional problems across early adolescence (ages 10 to 12 years). Given that gender has been found to interact with sexual harassment in predicting emotional problems in adolescence (Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023), we tested the moderating effect of gender in the model. As classroom context was found in Study II to influence the associations between sexual harassment and emotional problems, the clustering of individuals within classrooms was accounted for in the model (within-school class variability). By doing this, we were able to explore whether there is within-individual variability that might be explained by a key developmental context for early adolescents, namely the classroom.

### *Method*

In Study III, all three waves of data collected for the PRISE project were used. Peer sexual harassment was measured using the PSH-C victimization subscale, and emotional problems were measured using the Swedish self-report versions of the emotional symptoms subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Lundh et al., 2008). To analyze the data we used a Multilevel Linear Mixed Model (MLMM), and all statistical analyses were conducted in R, version 4.0.2 (R Core Team, 2020). The data were structured based on students (Level 1) nested in classes (Level 2). The fixed effects in the model represent average effects for all individuals (between-individual differences), while the random effects capture variations across classes and individuals nested in classes (within-

individual differences). In the model, emotional problems were predicted by the level of peer sexual harassment victimization as a fixed factor, with random individual intercept and random class intercept. Developmental trajectories and gender interactions were calculated by adding the interaction effects of time (T1, T2, T3) and gender to victimization, resulting in two two-way interactions (victimization\*time and victimization\*gender), and one three-way interaction (victimization\*time\*gender). To explore within-individual variability in the development of the association between victimization and emotional problems across time, random slopes of the interaction effect of victimization and time (victimization\*time) were added to the model. By doing this, we allowed for variability in the development of the association between victimization and emotional problems over time across individuals and classrooms.

### *Results*

On the between-individual level, peer sexual harassment victimization was positively related to emotional problems across time among both girls and boys. However, victimized girls reported more emotional problems than victimized boys did. The positive association between peer sexual harassment victimization and emotional problems had a declining slope over time, meaning that the positive association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems was the strongest at T1 and became weaker over time.

On the within-individual level, we found a high amount of variance in the random slope of the interaction between victimization and time, suggesting that even though the association between victimization and emotional problems across time was on average declining (between-individual variance), this was not the case for every individual and in every classroom (within-individual variance). Instead, there was a positive association between the random intercepts of emotional problems and slopes of the interaction between victimization and time across individuals, indicating that individuals who had higher initial levels of emotional problems developed more emotional problems when victimized across time, compared to individuals who had lower initial levels of emotional problems. In contrast, across classrooms there was a negative association between the random intercepts of emotional problems and slopes of the interaction between victimization and time, meaning that in classrooms with higher

initial levels of adolescent emotional problems, adolescents were less negatively affected by sexual harassment in terms of developing fewer emotional problems across time, compared to classrooms with lower initial levels of adolescent emotional problems.



## General Discussion

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The overarching aim of this thesis was to address peer sexual harassment in the developmentally sensitive period of the transition between childhood and adolescence. More specifically, the aim was to advance the field of research in three respects, called for by the current gaps in knowledge. First, to address the lack of evaluated measures of peer sexual harassment in early adolescence, the psychometric properties of the new measure Peer Sexual Harassment Scale-Child (PSH-C) were evaluated. Second, to address the lack of knowledge of peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence, the PSH-C was used in Study II to examine associations between victimization, perpetration, or witnessing on the one hand and emotional problems on the other, and how these associations were moderated by gender and class occurrence of peer sexual harassment among ten-year-olds. Lastly, taking into account the possible bias presented in previous studies not separating between-individual differences from within-individual processes, Study III explored longitudinal associations between peer sexual harassment victimization and emotional problems among early adolescents (ages 10 to 12 years), taking into account both between- and within-individual variability.

In summary, Study I showed that the PSH-C displayed good psychometric properties, and revealed a two-dimensional structure of the scale in both boys and girls: one dimension reflecting direct verbal sexual aggression and the other reflecting general sexual harassment. In Study II it was found that already at ten years of age many children report having experienced peer sexual harassment, but also that many of them participate in multiple peer sexual harassment roles. All three roles (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing) were associated with emotional problems compared to children who were not exposed, with those who were victims and witnesses reporting more emotional problems and those who were perpetrators reporting fewer emotional problems, and these associations varied across classrooms. In addition, both gender differences and similarities were found, which will be further discussed below. In Study III, when looking at the group level, victimization was associated with an increase in emotional

problems across time. However, there was a decrease in the association over time, which also appeared to be true for the association between classrooms, suggesting that the associations were the strongest in the youngest ages. In contrast, within-individual and within-school class variance showed that early adolescents who had higher initial levels of emotional problems had a stronger association between victimization and emotional problems over time, and in classrooms with lower initial levels of adolescent emotional problems, adolescents had a stronger association between victimization and emotional problems over time. This implies that the negative effects of peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence mainly was found on the individual level.

The combined contributions of these three studies show how the construct of peer sexual harassment can be structured in early adolescence, that peer sexual harassment is part of life already in early ages, and that context matters. Yet, perhaps even more importantly, peer sexual harassment in early adolescence is found to be related to emotional problems, especially for those who are victims of it. Moreover, the psychosocial development of victimized adolescents who experience higher initial levels of emotional problems seems to be compromised over time. Although there was variation between genders, classroom contexts, and roles (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing), the positive associations on the within-individual level emerge over time during a central period of psychosocial development, namely the transition between childhood and adolescence. This underlines the potentially harmful impact of peer sexual harassment on development at this age, calling for action to address its occurrence among youths. Thus, the three studies make important contributions to the literature by increasing the empirical knowledge about peer sexual harassment in the transition between childhood and adolescence. Central findings will be discussed in more detail below.

## Measuring Peer Sexual Harassment in Early Adolescence

An initial objective of this thesis was to address the lack of evaluated measures of peer sexual harassment in early adolescence by evaluating a new scale comprising developmentally informed items, the Peer Sexual Harassment Scale-

Child (PSH-C). Results showed that the PSH-C displayed good psychometric properties with a high level of equivalence across genders in its underlying structure, item loadings, and item intercepts. The PSH-C can therefore be considered a valid, reliable, and interpretable measure of peer sexual harassment in younger ages for both boys and girls. Results revealed a two-dimensional structure of the scale: one dimension reflecting verbal sexual aggression (e.g., homophobic-name calling) and the other reflecting general sexual harassment (e.g., physical forms, verbal comments and jokes, and visual sexual harassment). The content of the dimensions differed from that identified in previous research on older adolescents, as it was not divided according to the physical and non-physical dimensions of peer sexual harassment (Ortega et al., 2010; Vega-Gea et al., 2016; Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005). Also, the fact that boys and girls seemed to understand and respond to the questions in a similar way contradicts previous studies suggesting that the construct of peer sexual harassment differs between boys and girls (McMaster et al., 2002; Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005).

The first dimension of the PSH-C, verbal sexual aggression, could be understood as a specific verbal factor with the intention to offend the victim (Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005), or as derogative behavior with the intention to increase the perpetrator's status (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012). The second dimension, general sexual harassment (e.g., physical forms, verbal comments and jokes, and visual sexual harassment), included more diverse peer sexual harassment situations than the first dimension and was therefore more open to different explanations. Like our first dimension, our second dimension may represent behaviors aimed at harming, but it could also have other explanations that do not necessarily indicate intentionally offensive behavior but rather an immature attempt to express sexual interest or attraction (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017; Pellegrini, 2001; Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005). Our second dimension may therefore additionally be interpreted as reflecting expressions of children's limited ability to handle the increased cross-gender peer interactions that adolescence implies (Pellegrini, 2001; Pepler et al., 2006), as they are beginning to practice their relational skills with peers away from the influence and support of adults (Hazen, 2018; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005).

The difference in both gender invariance and between dimensions in early versus later adolescence found in this thesis may reflect developmental differences between the ages. These differences may then in turn influence not only how peer sexual harassment is interpreted and understood, but also the nature

of the harassment that occurs. For example, cognitive and emotional maturity affects how a person interprets and understands situations, which in turn influences the meaning they attribute to events such as sexual harassment by peers. In early adolescence, one's cognitive ability is characterized by a concrete way of thinking whereas more abstract ways of understanding one's surroundings are often limited (Bornstein, 2018a, 2018b). Thus, in early adolescence an event such as being called a whore or gay is likely to be experienced as a concrete unpleasant situation rather than being understood in a larger social context in which the full meaning of the word is included in the experience. As cognitive abilities develop and more refined and abstract abilities are established later in adolescence, the same situation – being called a whore or gay – may therefore hold a different, more complex meaning for the person who is exposed. This is also likely to affect adolescents who harass others, with younger adolescents being less likely to understand the full meaning of what they say or do to their peers compared to older adolescents. Thus, the sexually loaded intention behind the behavior may not be as profound among younger adolescents compared to older ones. Is it peer sexual harassment, then? According to the definition used in the present thesis and how the questions are worded in the PSH-C, if the victim experiences the harassment as unwanted sexual attention, it is. In this way, the definition lies in the hands of the victim.

The developmental period studied, namely the transition between childhood and adolescence, is also a time that sees variations in maturity across adolescents, whereby some will be more emotionally, cognitively, and/or pubertally mature than others (Bornstein, 2018a, 2018b). Some will already be struggling with issues such as gender belonging, identity, or sexual orientation, and for these adolescents, being the target of sexual harassment may be extra sensitive and emotionally challenging (Smith et al., 2022). The dimensions of the peer sexual harassment construct found in early adolescence may therefore also reflect the variation in maturity across adolescents at this age. While some do not fully understand the meaning behind the words and actions and thus use them with the intent to offend the victim rather than in a sexualized way, others may find them highly sensitive and upsetting. These developmental aspects highlight the importance of further studying and understanding peer sexual harassment at different ages without unreflectively assuming that the same conditions are valid at all times of life.

The arguments above also strengthen support for the use of the PSH-C in younger ages, as it is designed to be developmentally informed. Therefore, considering the scale's attention to wording, number and length of items, and relevance to children of this age, it could be argued that the PSH-C is superior to other measures of peer sexual harassment for studying the experience in the transition between childhood and adolescence. In sum, the study suggests that the peer sexual harassment construct may differ between early and later adolescence, regarding both the dimensions of the construct and how it is understood and experienced across genders, highlighting the need to understand peer sexual harassment from a developmental perspective.

## Peer Sexual Harassment and Emotional Problems

The objective in both Studies II and III was to address the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems. In Study II, all three roles of peer sexual harassment (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing) were addressed, and it was shown that each role made a unique contribution in the association with emotional problems. We found that already at ten years of age, victims and witnesses reported more emotional problems, and that these associations varied across classrooms. Somewhat surprisingly, we also found that those who were perpetrators reported fewer emotional problems compared to those who were not involved, and that this association also varied across classrooms. As no previous study has included all three roles in the same analysis, these findings offer a rare and important contribution to the empirical literature on peer sexual harassment among youths. Although there was variation between genders, classroom contexts, and roles (victimization, perpetration, and witnessing), the findings emphasize the need to further understand these associations across time in order to be able to evaluate whether they may have harmful, or even protective, impacts on adolescents' development. As an overlap was found between the roles (e.g., almost all perpetrators also reported victimization), and victimization displayed the strongest effect sizes, this thesis only addressed this issue in regard to victimization. Hence, it is left to future research to examine the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems across time in regard to the perpetration and witnessing roles.

In Study III, we designed a study to increase the understanding of peer sexual harassment victimization and emotional problems in early adolescence. The specific aim was to examine both between-individual and within-individual variability in the development of the association between victimization and emotional problems across time among 10- to 12-year-olds. On a between-individual level, we found that early adolescents who reported more victimization than the group average also reported more emotional problems than the group average across time. The association decreased over time, however, which was also found when we looked at the association between classrooms, suggesting a form of habituation or the possibility that adolescents collectively develop better strategies for coping with the harassment over time.

Although the association between victimization and emotional problems on average decreased over time, this was not the case for every individual. Instead, the association varied within individuals, suggesting that the psychosocial development of victimized adolescents who experience higher initial levels of emotional problems is compromised over time and that the negative effects of peer sexual harassment mainly occur on the individual level. As individuals who already have higher levels of emotional problems are more negatively impacted by the harassment over time, there may be individual psychological characteristics that influence this relation. This could be due to diverse responses to harassment, such as variations in coping abilities or emotion regulation skills, social support, or unique circumstances of the situation. There could also be individual differences in how the harassment is interpreted, whereby some individuals may be more prone to attributing it to themselves (Tracy & Robins, 2006), making them more vulnerable to developing emotional issues. In Study III, we do not establish any causality between victimization and emotional problems; however, the fact that individuals with higher initial levels of emotional problems were more negatively affected by the victimization across time may indicate that the association is reciprocal. This was found in Skoog and Kapetanovic (2023), for example, who suggest that victimization affects the developmental process of emotional problems, but also that emotional problems affect the development of sexual harassment victimization across time. Research shows that individuals who experience stronger reactions to stressors are more vulnerable to developing emotional disorders compared to their less distressed and more emotionally stable peers (Lewis, 2018). It could therefore be the case that vulnerable students are victimized because they are perceived as easy targets

and as a consequence experience emotional problems, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to being revictimized. This reciprocal link between victimization and psychosocial development can be understood by using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). How peers respond to a child will change in interaction with the child depending on, for example, the child's temperament and social skills. Therefore, if a child is experiencing emotional problems and then becomes the target of peer sexual harassment, the harassment may reinforce the negative emotions and further drive the child's development in a negative direction. This may in turn create a viscous circle of negative development. The circle may also begin with the harassment itself, in that being a victim makes the child experience emotional problems, which in turn makes the child more vulnerable to being revictimized. Against this background, our findings show just how severe the occurrence of peer sexual harassment in early adolescence may be for some individuals from a developmental perspective. Thus, it is essential to actively prevent and address the occurrence of peer sexual harassment in order to be able to promote healthy psychological development for all individuals in their adolescent years.

It is important to note that our findings also show that not all individuals experienced an increase in emotional problems when victimized over time. Some instead had a declining slope, which may be a result of these adolescents developing better coping strategies or simply reflecting a form of habituation to peer sexual harassment exposure. A suggested direction for future research is to identify these within-individual aspects that either reduce or increase emotional problems when one is a victim of peer sexual harassment in early adolescence, as it is not necessarily the harassment itself but perhaps rather the harm it may do that is important to address and minimize from an individual developmental perspective.

## The Role of Gender

From both a theoretical and an empirical perspective, the issue of gender has had a central role in peer sexual harassment research in attempts to disentangle and explain its occurrence. The issue of gender has therefore also been considered in this thesis in addressing peer sexual harassment in the developmentally

sensitive period of the transition between childhood and adolescence. In the following section, gender similarities and differences will be discussed.

### *Gender Similarities*

Several gender similarities were found in all three studies. In Study I, findings suggest that both boys and girls understood and responded to the questions of peer sexual harassment victimization and witnessing in a similar way. In Study II, boys and girls reported general sexual harassment victimization to equal extents, and both boys and girls reported more emotional problems when they were victims and fewer when they were perpetrators, compared to students who were not involved. Also, no gender differences were found in either prevalence or association with emotional problems among those reporting witnessing. These findings of gender similarities may imply that gender aspects of peer sexual harassment in early adolescence are somewhat less profound compared to later in adolescence, a time at which gender differences have been found to be more prominent (Witkowska & Kjellberg, 2005). Taking an evolutionary perspective this may not be as unexpected, as many of the gender differences associated with peer sexual harassment can be explained by aspects of pubertal development, such as increased sexual interest or the development of typical gender characteristics (Schulz & Sisk, 2016; Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016b, 2016a). Our findings may therefore have been influenced by the fact that early adolescents are less likely to have entered puberty compared to older adolescents, thereby reducing gender differences in peer sexual harassment in younger ages.

The only role that displayed no gender differences in either prevalence or associations with emotional problems was that of peer sexual harassment witnessing. Another possible explanation for this may be that witnessing peer sexual harassment is less dependent on individual characteristics, such as gender, and is rather a reflection of the context in which the harassment occurs. These contextual aspects will be further discussed in the section *The Role of Context*.

*Gender Differences*

In Study II gender differences were found, with more boys than girls reporting being victims of verbal sexually aggressive forms of peer sexual harassment, and boys reporting more perpetration regardless of form. Still, in both Studies II and III, girls who reported victimization reported more emotional problems compared to victimized boys, and girls who reported perpetration reported fewer emotional problems compared to perpetrating boys. Combined, these findings suggest that even though boys in early adolescence are involved in peer sexual harassment, sometimes even more so than girls, the experiences are more strongly linked to emotional problems for girls. This is in line with what has been found in previous research among older adolescents, in which it has been suggested that this could be a result of girls experiencing more severe sexual harassment than boys (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Ormerod et al., 2008). It has also been suggested that it is influenced by different standards in terms of sexual activity and promiscuity (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Vrangalova et al., 2014), whereby girls who violate gender norms may suffer greater consequences than boys (Malamut et al., 2018).

Taking into account developmental aspects of early adolescence, girls at this age (ages 10 to 12 years) are more likely than boys to have entered puberty and to be more emotionally and cognitively mature (Benner, 2018). As puberty has in turn been associated with an increased probability of developing emotional issues, especially for girls (Rapee et al., 2019), girls who are victimized at this age may be more likely to develop emotional problems compared to boys. Some studies even suggest that this is true throughout the lifespan, in that girls in general are more sensitive to stress and are thereby more likely to develop emotional problems compared to boys (Matud, 2004; Wang et al., 2007).

The gender differences found regarding the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems may also reflect the prevailing gender norms in society. It may be that boys are not as good as girls at recognizing, describing, and putting their emotions into words, which in turn leads to girls reporting more emotional problems, even though boys may be equally disturbed by the harassment. If so, this points to the importance of emotional competence, for instance being able to put your emotions into words, as being able to verbalize emotional issues may be essential to being able to get help from others.

The fact that boys were clearly overrepresented as perpetrators of peer sexual harassment is in line with previous research (Espelage et al., 2012; Lichty & Campbell, 2012; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). Through a feminist perspective, stereotypical gender norms of masculinity and femininity have been shown to affect children from an early age (Wong & Yeung, 2019). As discussed previously, girls who violate gender norms may suffer greater consequences than boys, causing girls to feel shame and blame for being sexually harassed (Malamut et al., 2018; Ringrose & Regehr, 2023). However, boys who do not conform to stereotypical gender expressions are viewed more negatively by peers, putting pressure on them to engage in sexual harassment in order to appear masculine (Kwan et al., 2020; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Ringrose & Regehr, 2023). This may offer some explanation for why boys are overrepresented among perpetrators. Boys' motivation might be influenced by the characteristic of gender as described in the PPCT model, making them behave as they perceive the environment expects them to behave, using peer sexual harassment to reinforce socially constructed gender norms (Li & Craig, 2020; Robinson, 2005; Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020). This may in turn also explain why boys report more victimization of verbal sexually aggressive forms of peer sexual harassment, similar to what has been found in research among older adolescents (Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020). Verbal sexually aggressive forms are more common in same-gender harassment (McMaster et al., 2002). As boys are overrepresented in the present thesis among both perpetrators and victims of verbal sexually aggressive forms, this implies that early adolescent boys are more likely than girls to be exposed to same-gender harassment. In turn, same-gender harassment can be seen as a form of aggression used in order to increase one's own status among peers (McMaster et al., 2002); or, taking an evolutionary perspective, a derogative tactic to reduce the attractiveness of sexual competitors (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017). Feminist scholars would instead mainly explain same-gender harassment as a tool for policing gender nonconformity among same-gender peers who are, or are perceived to be, different from the main group regarding their sexual and/or gender expressions (Conroy, 2013). Thus, one way of understanding boys' perpetration of peer sexual harassment in early adolescence could be as aggression toward peers, involving aspects such as status, power, and policing behaviors.

A somewhat surprising finding in Study II was that girls who perpetrated peer sexual harassment reported fewer emotional problems compared not only to boys who perpetrated but also to those who were not involved in sexual

harassment at all. This somewhat contradicts the argument that girls who violate gender norms may suffer greater consequences than boys (Malamut et al., 2018). In the more recent concept of appetitive aggression, it is suggested that individuals who have themselves been subjected to negative experiences, such as sexual harassment, may find it satisfying or thrilling to do it to someone else as this gives them a sense of power and control (Howard, 2011). As most perpetrators were found in Study II to also be victims, those few girls who perpetrated peer sexual harassment in early adolescence may have been victims of peer sexual harassment themselves. Based on the concept of appetitive aggression, it is thus possible that girls who perpetrate peer sexual harassment experience a sense of power and control when doing it to someone else, reducing the level of emotional problems they experience. However, as the finding in Study II is based on cross-sectional data, it could be the case that the negative aspects of perpetrating peer sexual harassment do not emerge until later in adolescence (Rinehart et al., 2020). It is therefore important for future studies to explore these associations longitudinally in order to be able to answer whether the positive aspects of perpetrating peer sexual harassment among girls hold across time.

Even though several gender differences were found in the studies included in this thesis it is important to note that, overall, the effect sizes of gender differences were small. Thus, the argument that the more profound gender differences may not evolve until later in adolescence can still be considered valid. Future research on peer sexual harassment is encouraged to also include other individual characteristics in addition to gender, such as experienced pressure to conform to gender norms, emotion regulation strategies, sensitivity to stress, or emotional awareness, to further understand the prevalence and association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems in younger ages.

## The Role of Context

In both Studies II and III, the role of context is addressed by taking into account the fact that students are clustered in different classrooms. In both studies, variation was found across classrooms in both prevalence and the association with emotional problems, suggesting that peer sexual harassment is more common in some classrooms than others, and that it is more strongly associated with emotional problems in some classrooms than others. In Study II, we evaluated

whether the mean level of witnessing sexual harassment in the classroom is related to levels of emotional problems by analyzing the moderating effect of classroom level of witnessing on the association between peer sexual harassment exposure and emotional problems. However, as no moderating effects were found, no link was established between classroom prevalence and reported levels of emotional problems using the class mean of witnessing. In Study III, we found that the association between victimization and emotional problems in classrooms with higher initial levels of adolescent emotional problems became weaker over time, and in classrooms with lower initial levels of adolescent emotional problems became stronger over time. Therefore, although we did not find a link between classroom prevalence and emotional problems using the class mean of witnessing, the combined findings from the two studies imply that the context may be able to both accentuate and diminish the prevalence of peer sexual harassment as well as its associations with emotional problems. Together, these findings highlight the importance of addressing the classroom context when studying peer sexual harassment among youths.

As the studies in this thesis capture peer sexual harassment in school, it should be noted that in early adolescence students spend most of their day at school with the same group of students (i.e., sharing the same classroom and teacher). Therefore, our findings may best reflect events occurring in the microsystem, in which proximal processes take place that drive the development of the individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). At the micro level, teachers' actions and the school climate addressing sexual harassment are important for understanding peer sexual harassment among young people. Even though the studies of the thesis do not specifically address what it is in the classroom context that matters, previous research has found, for example, that students reported more sexual harassment and had more tolerant attitudes about it when they felt their teachers acted infrequently against it (Horn & Poteat, 2023), and when their school climate was more tolerant of sexual harassment (Ormerod et al., 2023). In addition, classroom climate, or the level of relational support among the students, has been found to moderate the association between sexual harassment victimization and well-being (Crowley et al., 2021; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021).

In the transition between childhood and adolescence, peer groups become increasingly salient and influential, and the likelihood that one will follow the norms and rules of one's peer group at this age is high (Hazen, 2018). Studies

suggest that peers communicate powerful norms that may influence young people's sexual harassment experiences, which in turn may normalize sexual harassment among peers at this age (Bolduc et al., 2023; Honkatukia et al., 2023; Ringrose & Regehr, 2023). These norms are often stereotypically gendered (Ringrose & Regehr, 2023), and studies have found that sexual prejudice is at its highest during the middle school years, subsiding thereafter (Poteat & Anderson, 2012; Robinson et al., 2013). As children use social norms to guide their behavior (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), a context that indicates approval of peer sexual harassment, through either *injunctive* or *descriptive* norms, might increase the occurrence of these behaviors (Velásquez et al., 2021). Consequently, if interaction with peers in the classroom is characterized by negative interplay such as peer sexual harassment, the individual's long-term development may be affected. Preventing peer sexual harassment as it first starts appearing in the school context could therefore be a powerful tool for preventing a spiral of negative social climate caused by sexual harassment in the peer group.

The contextual perspective could be even further broadened by taking into account the societal context in which sexual harassment occurs, representing the macro level in the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). As the current thesis uses data collected in a Swedish context, the societal structure and gender norms of Sweden are of particular interest. Compared to other European countries, Sweden is generally seen as more gender-equal (EIGE, 2023), which could imply that the stereotypical masculine norms causing sexual harassment behaviors are less prevalent here compared to countries with less gender equality. Despite this, peer sexual harassment was found to be prevalent in the current thesis, similar to what has been found in other studies of peer sexual harassment in a Swedish context (Dahlqvist et al., 2016; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021, 2022). This suggests that the stereotypical masculine norms may nonetheless be prevalent among Swedish youth, at least at a micro level. A possible explanation for this is that regulations and laws are not sufficient if the attitudes and behaviors of organizations and individuals within the systems are not consistent with these rules.

Together, our findings shed light on the context, with interventions targeting social norms and classroom climate potentially serving as important ways to prevent negative gender norms from establishing in the peer group and thus also a future negative spiral of sexual violence (Espelage et al., 2015, 2018). The findings also emphasize the importance of studying a greater variety of individual

and contextual factors that underpin sexual harassment behaviors, and doing so on both a between- and within-individual level. Doing this could contribute to the development of more sophisticated models and more comprehensive theories for explaining peer sexual harassment in early adolescence.

## A Child Perspective

In this thesis, sexual harassment among young children is studied. It is therefore important to stress that the developmental aspects characterizing this age, such as cognitive and/or emotional maturity also will impact how children interpret and perceive the harassment, and what the intention behind the harassment behavior is. The empirical studies presented, the conclusions drawn, and the explanations discussed in the thesis are mostly based on how scholars and adults, rather than the children themselves, define and understand peer sexual harassment. While this is necessary partly in order to enhance the field of research, it entails a risk that interpretations will not always be truly accurate from a child's perspective. It is therefore important to be cautious in how one explains things, the kinds of wording one uses, and how one communicates information. For example, in Study II we found that almost everyone who sexually harasses someone else has been a victim themselves. This suggests that it is not as simple as viewing those who perpetrate as "the bad ones" or the victims as "the ones to be pitied". Instead, I argue that peer sexual harassment should be viewed as a broader problem in which children need to find healthy ways to relate to each other and their sexual development.

This also raises the questions of what constitutes acceptable behavior in early adolescence and who has the authority to decide what is and is not acceptable. Regarding peer sexual harassment, its definition lies in the experience of the victim; thus, the victim has the authority to decide what is and is not acceptable. However, it may be difficult for a ten-year-old victim to fully comprehend the harassment or their response to it. Thus, adults should be available to guide and assist the child in their experience, rather than allowing their adult interpretations and experiences to take precedence. In order to be able to help and support children in the best possible way, adults simply need to listen to them and meet them where they are. A limitation of this thesis is therefore that we do not know

how the children themselves would define or explain the harassment we sought to measure.

## Future Studies

Future research on peer sexual harassment in early adolescence needs to not only study both between- and within-individual variance of sexual harassment, but also acknowledge that the negative effects mainly occur on the individual level. Because between-individual effects do not capture within-individual variance, and what is discovered at the between-individual level is not always true for every individual, there is a risk that the results may be misinterpreted if both levels are not considered. This also underlines the need to understand more about the individual psychological processes that may explain why some individuals fare worse than others when victimized. This could be done, for example, by also including emotion regulation strategies to inform the within-individual variability.

In Study I, the PSH-C displayed promising results in capturing peer sexual harassment among early adolescents. However, the items need to be further tested regarding their validity as a scale (e.g., test-retest and convergent validity for witnessing) and in different cultural contexts. It could also be valuable to include measures of peer sexual harassment developed for older participants (e.g., AAUW) and evaluate these questions in relation to the questions in the PSH-C, and how they are interpreted among children in late childhood.

The somewhat surprising finding in Study II regarding perpetration being associated with fewer emotional problems needs to be further evaluated across time. This could potentially answer questions concerning what motivates and maintains the presence of peer sexual harassment among peers, which in turn could be of great value in developing interventions. In addition, as peer sexual harassment most commonly occurs in the presence of peers (Lichty & Campbell, 2012), understanding how those who witness it are affected across time could offer important insights into what may hinder or enable the occurrence of this harassment, as has been found in the nearby field of bullying (Paull et al., 2012).

The current thesis states that context matters; it thus follows that future research on peer sexual harassment in early adolescence should acknowledge

and study the effects of sexual harassment based on the clustering within classes or schools. However, more research is needed in order to understand *what* it is in the context that matters. For example, future research could be inspired by findings from older adolescent samples, showing that psychosocial relations (e.g., relationships to peers, classmates, teachers, parents, and/or other family members) and school belongingness matter (Espelage, Van Ryzin, et al., 2018; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021).

In both Studies II and III, our findings imply that there are gender differences in how peer sexual harassment is related to emotional problems. However, as we do not take into account other expressions of poorer psychological well-being that are more prevalent among boys, such as externalizing behaviors (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013), our findings may not fully capture the negative psychological outcomes that are associated with sexual harassment for boys. Our study may therefore underreport how boys are affected when exposed. We therefore urge future research to also take into account externalizing aspects of psychological well-being, such as anger or concentration difficulties, when studying how peer sexual harassment may be associated with negative psychological outcomes among youths.

Lastly, as the thesis shows that there is an overlap between the peer sexual harassment roles, more research is needed to explore these overlaps across time. This could answer questions about what characterizes (psychological characteristics, SES, gender, etc.) individuals who participate in several roles, and whether these individuals may be more vulnerable to negative development over time.

## Methodological Considerations

In the following sections, some of the most central methodologic concerns will be addressed. The first concern involves possible issues of biased estimates. In the PSH-C, children were asked about events that had occurred during the current school year. Research has shown that in late childhood (7-9 years), a bias develops whereby one remembers elements with a common context, such as the school environment, as more proximate in time compared to if they had occurred in a different context (Coughlin et al., 2023). Early adolescents may therefore have difficulty distinguishing between events occurring in different school

years as asked about in the PSH-C. This may in turn generate biased estimates if one assumes a causal temporal order when studying the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems across time, as it can be difficult to determine whether something that happened a year ago had an impact on someone's well-being a year later. To reduce this risk of bias estimates in Study III when using longitudinal data, statistical methods that do not assume causality were chosen. To be able to further explore the causality or reciprocity of peer sexual harassment and emotional problems in early adolescent years, more frequent measurements than those used in the current project (once a year) are called for. Another risk of bias estimates associated with memory function is that people tend to remember events better when the memory elicits emotion (Gargya et al., 2018). Thus, as individuals who do not experience the harassment as disturbing (even though it is unwanted) may be less likely to remember the harassment and in turn less likely to report it, the associations between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems found in Studies II and III may be overestimated.

Another methodological limitation is that the thesis does not address the complexity or duality of peer sexual harassment in relation to well-being as pointed out in the literature, whereby victimization and perpetration can imply both positive and negative outcomes (Brown et al., 2020; Keddie, 2009). This duality distinguishes peer sexual harassment from other types of harassment or bullying, and emphasizes the complexity associated with the experience of being involved. As no positive individual outcomes such as self-esteem or perceived popularity are included in the current thesis, the potential duality of peer sexual harassment is not captured. It is therefore possible that the association between peer sexual harassment and psychological well-being in the transition between childhood and adolescence is far more complex than presented in the thesis.

As the sample used in this thesis consisted of only a few participants reporting a gender other than boy or girl, this group could not be considered in the analysis. This is unfortunate, as research shows that gender-minority youths are more sexually harassed, and more affected when they are harassed, compared to their gender-majority peers (Poteat & Russell, 2013). Thus, the thesis does not attend to the more vulnerable groups of youths who may be the most distressed and harmed by peer sexual harassment.

Another limitation of the thesis is its lack of measures of pubertal status. As some of the theoretical explanations of peer sexual harassment rest on the

assumption that pubertal development increases sexual harassment behaviors (such as evolutionary theory), having information about participants' pubertal status would have enabled us to also test these assumptions. Instead, the conclusions here rely on empirical findings from the literature regarding when pubertal development typically has its onset (Strauss & Barbieri, 2009), creating room for error.

In Study I, we found that the distribution of the PSH-C was positively skewed, with the majority of the children reporting lower frequencies of harassment. As this has also been found in other research on peer sexual harassment among adolescents (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012; Leemis et al., 2019; Ortega et al., 2010), it is argued in the current thesis that it is representative of the research question studied in the targeted ages. However, this line of thought could be further developed. If skewness is common, this may imply that the foundational approach to measuring peer sexual harassment in the literature overall should be changed, as the current way of constructing measures does not succeed in capturing the variation in peer sexual harassment. One possible way to address this problem is to construct a tool that measures not only the actual behavior of peer sexual harassment but also aspects that are known to usually precede the harassment. Based on the PSH-C, this may be especially important in constructing a measure of peer sexual harassment perpetration, as this is the most skewed subscale in the studies discussed in this thesis. For example, research has found that difficulties in emotion regulation and inaccurate interpretations of situations may predict aggressive behaviors (Smeijers et al., 2020) and that gender norms and attitudes regarding peer sexual harassment are important in the occurrence of peer sexual harassment in adolescents (Espelage et al., 2015, 2018). Thus, constructing a measure that also includes aspects such as emotion regulation strategies and gender norm attitudes may capture the variance in peer sexual harassment perpetration in a better way. This kind of information could also be of great value from a prevention perspective, informing interventions targeting peer sexual harassment in schools.

This thesis also holds a number of methodological strengths. One of its main strengths is that it is based on a large-scale longitudinal study that allowed for the separation of between- and within-individual variability. The longitudinal data enabled a systematic evaluation of the association between peer sexual harassment and emotional problems at different levels of assessment, and this enhanced the ability to draw conclusions about the nature of these associations.

By studying both inter-individual differences and intra-individual changes in how peer sexual harassment relates to emotional problems, differences between the levels were unfolded, thus informing not only the empirical but also the theoretical literature on peer sexual harassment in early adolescence.

Another methodological strength is that data were collected in school during regular school hours with project researchers present, and that this was made possible during pandemic restrictions as well through the development of a chat function. This enabled all children, regardless of their living conditions, to fill in the questionnaire in privacy and to ask the research team questions at any time during the survey. The ecological validity of the included studies was also strengthened, as the data collection was conducted in the participating children's natural environment and in digital form, which, considering today's digital society, children in early adolescence may see as a natural way to answer questions.

Finally, the use of a developmental and age-appropriate measure, the PSH-C, was another methodological strength of the included studies. As the measure was developed especially for early adolescents, knowledge derived from the measure could be considered valid for and representative of how peer sexual harassment is displayed in early adolescence. Also, the fact that the PSH-C was thoroughly evaluated regarding its psychometric properties can be considered especially valuable, as much of the literature on peer sexual harassment in adolescence relies on unevaluated measures.

## Ethical Considerations

Given the age of the participants and the sensitive nature of the subject of this thesis, particular attention has been paid to the project's ethical considerations. All study procedures have been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reference number 2019-02755). Due to the longitudinal design of the PRISE project, personal data have been handled in accordance with guidelines set out in the Personal Data Act. The collected data have been treated confidentially, which means that personal privacy has been protected, no unauthorized person can access the answers, and results from the collected data are only presented at a group level with no possibility to identify individuals. All data and information material will be stored for ten years and then destroyed, in line with University

of Gothenburg guidelines. All data have been handled in accordance with the European Union law on General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

When creating the survey, we paid particular attention to the use of age-appropriate measurements and visual presentations of the questions. The order of the questions was adjusted so that the beginning and end of the survey contained more neutral subjects, such as demographics and personal strengths. The survey was pilot-tested with children of middle-school age before data collection.

All participating children and their guardians gave active consent to participate in the study. During data collection, one or two trained researchers from the project visited the classes to administer the survey, and were available for questions during class. An introduction to the survey was given by the same researcher to all participating classes. In this introduction we informed the children that participation was voluntary, that they could skip questions or withdraw their participation at any time, that no unauthorized person would have access to their answers, and that the results would be presented in such a way that no individual could be identified. We told the participants both verbally and in writing that they could contact the student healthcare staff at their school if they needed someone to talk to about the issues addressed in the survey. Each participating class received SEK 1,500 (USD 180) for class purposes each time they participated.

Because the present research investigates the different roles of peer sexual harassment among children (victims, perpetrators, and witnesses), we pay particular attention to how these roles are presented to the public as there might be a risk of stigmatization. We strive to communicate research results in a trustworthy, nuanced, and objective way. Furthermore, there may be a risk that certain groups (e.g., children, schools, areas) are more problematic in the case of sexual harassment, and thus risk being identified as negative based on the project's results. We are well aware of such risks, and consider it important to present results in such a way that negative effects at these group levels are avoided.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

This thesis presents several important findings for the future field of peer sexual harassment research, but also when formulating and implementing policies and preventative interventions targeting sexual harassment behaviors in a school

context in early adolescence. As peer sexual harassment appears to be ubiquitous and associated with poorer well-being for both boys and girls already in early adolescence, the thesis highlights the need to address peer sexual harassment in schools early on. It also suggests that there are several developmental aspects that need to be taken into account when attempting to understand, and in turn address, peer sexual harassment in early adolescence. First, neither the issue of gender nor the sexual aspects seem to be as central in peer sexual harassment in early adolescence as they are in later adolescence. However, as the context of the classroom or peer group seems to be important, aspects such as social norms, gender norms, and/or attitudes and values regarding sexual harassment behaviors both in the peer group and among teachers are important. Second, the developmental aspect also placed a focus on what normal development entails. Children at this age need to be able to explore, learn, test, and fail in relation to peers, as an important part of their emotional, relational, cognitive, and sexual development. Still, this can never be done at the expense of the well-being of other peers or the child themselves. Thus, the key question is: How do we teach children to thrive in their relationships without crossing the line in regard to themselves or others?

The literature on peer sexual harassment among older adolescents highlights the need for policy and practice to address peer sexual harassment using varied approaches at multiple conceptual levels (Poteat & Russell, 2013). The following discussion regarding policy and practice addressing peer sexual harassment will therefore be structured based on the conceptual framework of the PPCT model, from a macro level, a micro level, and an individual level.

On a macro level, the implementation of nondiscrimination and anti-bullying policies, inclusive curricula, educator training, and student resources has been linked to an improved school climate, for both students who define themselves as HBTQ and those who do not (Russell et al., 2010). However, many schools lack explicit policies on sexual harassment, and Brown and colleagues (2023) found that although specific policies regarding sexual harassment were present in schools, students were often unaware of them. Interestingly, Brown and colleagues also found no correlation between the existence of school policies on sexual harassment and the extent to which this harassment occurred. Taken together, the results suggest that having school policies on sexual harassment is not enough to tackle the problem if the values and policies are not established in all of the school's practices. This is also stressed by Lehtonen and

colleagues (2023), who further emphasize the need for policies and values to inform all school practices – in both attitudes and behaviors among staff, teachers, and students – in order to create a safe space for children and adolescents to thrive (Lehtonen et al., 2023).

Interventions targeting peer sexual harassment in early adolescence have also focused on the micro level, such as addressing gender norms in the peer group and teachers' ability to address sexual harassment occurring in the classroom. Lehtonen and colleagues (2023) state that teachers' curiosity about and interest in how early adolescents navigate age, gender, and sexuality is a necessity for relevant sexuality education. They also suggest that heteronormativity should be questioned as part of the teaching, and that early adolescents should be taught how to actively challenge heteronormative practices in their peer interactions. Thus, according to Lehtonen and colleagues (2023), as teachers play an important role in shaping the social climate in the classroom when it comes to sexual behaviors, interventions aimed at enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills in addressing peer sexual harassment could be of value in targeting peer sexual harassment on a micro level. Another aspect to consider is those who witness the harassment, as their behaviors and responses could have a significant influence on the harassment (Paull et al., 2012). In the present thesis, many early adolescents report having witnessed peer sexual harassment in the current school year. Therefore, interventions with the objective of enhancing witnesses' ability to intervene when witnessing the harassment also need to be addressed. A study of bystander behaviors in preventing peer sexual violence found that more positive social norms and a lower denial of sexual violence as a problem were associated with more positive helping behaviors among peers (Banyard et al., 2021). Thus, the norms and attitudes regarding sexual harassment that are taught and practiced in school may generate positive helping behaviors among peers who witness the harassment. As most peer sexual harassment occurs in the presence of peers (Lichty & Campbell, 2012), interventions targeting norms and attitudes regarding sexual harassment may therefore be especially powerful as they increase witnesses' likelihood to intervene.

Lastly, as findings in this thesis suggest that there are individual differences in the impact of peer sexual harassment on psychosocial development in early adolescence, interventions targeting the individual level also need to be addressed. Valido and colleagues (2022) found that among 10- to 16-year-olds, impulsivity had significant positive associations with homophobic name-calling

perpetration and victimization at both within- and between-person levels of variability. They further found that higher empathy was associated with lower homophobic name-calling perpetration at both the within- and between-person levels, which has also been found in previous literature (Poteat et al., 2012). Thus, potential aspects to consider when targeting peer sexual harassment on the individual level in interventions could involve addressing impulsive behavior, cognition, and emotion regulation strategies, and focusing on increasing levels of empathy (Espelage, Low, et al., 2015; Espelage, Van Ryzin, et al., 2018).

Another individual aspect that is usually included among others in interventions against peer sexual harassment is the ability to understand and check for consent between peers (DeGue et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2017). I would like to highlight consent as a skill that is necessary for children to be able to have healthy intimate relationships, while at the same time allowing them to explore and develop in interaction with others. Consent is defined as giving approval of what is done or proposed by another (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Increasing the skill of checking for consent should decrease peer sexual harassment based on immature relational skills and immature attempts to handle the natural and healthy increased sexual interest that adolescence entails. As skills that are taught early in an individual's development are more likely to integrate into their behavior, teaching about consent even before early adolescence could be of great value. An example of how this could be done is provided by a small, non-evaluated project that was launched in 2020 as a reaction to the new consent law established in Sweden in 2018 (Make Equal, 2022). The idea of the project was to continue the work of regulations and laws in practice, with the objective of creating and implementing material (a children's book, a rhyme, and working materials for preschool pedagogues) for practicing consent among preschool children (ages 2-5 years). The focus was to shift the responsibility from recipient to initiator, so that the child wishing to play or interact with another child checks for consent before the other child has to say no. This project takes a broader perspective on consent than specifically in relation to sexualized or intimate interactions with peers, instead focusing on everyday interactions such as playing or doing things together. The idea, however, is that if the skill of being able to check for consent is established early, this will in turn be generalized into all peer interactions as the child grows up, including the sexualized and intimate ones that emerge in early adolescence (Make Equal, 2022).

To summarize, in order to be able to address, prevent, and intervene against peer sexual harassment in early adolescence, a multilevel approach is needed. Interventions at the macro level could include establishing school policies on peer sexual harassment, increasing student resources, and actively working against hegemonic masculinity norms on a societal level. Interventions at the micro level could include targeting gender norms and attitudes regarding sexual harassment in the peer group, strengthening teachers' tools in addressing peer sexual harassment in the classroom, and school policies and values concerning sexual harassment and gender norms informing all school practices, in both attitudes and behaviors. Finally, interventions at the individual level could include targeting early adolescents' impulsive behavior, cognition, and emotion regulation strategies, increasing levels of empathy, and practicing the skill of checking for consent. As a brief final comment, based on my perspective as both a researcher and a clinical child therapist, I argue that it is important to never forget that while sexual harassment between peers is the children's problem, it is the adults' responsibility to solve.

## Conclusion

This thesis offers a nuanced understanding of peer sexual harassment during the critical transition from childhood to adolescence. It highlights the need for targeted interventions that consider both developmental and contextual factors. Overall, the studies show that peer sexual harassment is a common experience already in late childhood, and that it is associated with more emotional problems for both boys and girls. Importantly, the younger the participants were, the stronger the association was with emotional problems. Two key developmental aspects that were identified were that the construct of peer sexual harassment may be structured differently in early adolescence compared to later in adolescence, and that some individuals may be more vulnerable than others when victimized. The context also plays an important part, as both prevalence and how peer sexual harassment is related to emotional problems vary across classrooms. The findings underscore the importance of adopting an ecological perspective in addressing peer sexual harassment in schools, and of recognizing the variability in its occurrence and impact across individuals and classrooms. In addition, the results highlight the need to study peer sexual harassment in younger ages.

Further research and practical implications stemming from these studies can inform interventions aimed at promoting safe and supportive environments for all children and adolescents.



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# Supplemental Materials

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## Peer Sexual Harassment Scale – Child, Svensk Originalversion

### *Viktimisering*

Frågorna handlar om saker man inte vill ska hända eller som inte känns bra. Tänk tillbaka på hur du har haft det i 4:an. Har någon elev gjort något av detta mot dig fast du inte ville?

1. Tagit på dina privata kroppsdelar (till exempel snopp/snippa, rumpa och bröst)?
2. Pussat eller kramat dig eller försökt göra det?
3. Kallat dig homo, bög, lesbisk eller liknande ord?
4. Kallat dig kuk, fitta, hora eller liknande?
5. Kommenterat eller skämtat om privata kroppsdelar (till exempel snopp/snippa, rumpa och bröst) eller om sex?
6. Visat, skickat eller gett dig bilder eller meddelanden som har med nakenhet eller sex att göra?

Svarsalternativ: 1 = *aldrig*, 2 = *en gång*, 3 = *några gånger* 4 = *många gånger*

### *Förövare*

Nu undrar vi om du själv har gjort något av det som står nedan mot någon annan elev fast den inte ville det? Har du...

1. Tagit på en annan elevs privata kroppsdelar (till exempel snopp/snippa, rumpa och bröst)?
2. Pussat eller kramat en annan elev eller försökt göra det?
3. Kallat en annan elev för homo, bög, lesbisk eller liknande ord?

4. Kallat en annan elev för kuk, fitta, hora eller liknande?
5. Kommenterat eller skämtat om privata kroppsdelar (till exempel snopp/snippa, rumpa och bröst) eller om sex?
6. Visat, skickat eller gett den andra eleven bilder eller meddelanden som har med nakenhet eller sex att göra?

Svarsalternativ: 1 = *aldrig*, 2 = *en gång*, 3 = *några gånger* 4 = *många gånger*

#### *Bevittna*

Har du sett eller hört att något av detta har hänt någon annan elev på skolan fast den inte ville det?

Tänk tillbaka på hur du har haft det i 4:an. Har du sett eller hört att...

1. En elev har tagit på en annan elevs privata kroppsdelar (till exempel snopp/snippa, rumpa och bröst)?
2. En elev har pussat eller kramat en annan elev eller försökt göra det?
3. En elev har kallat en annan elev för homo, böj, lesbisk eller liknande ord?
4. En elev har kallat en annan elev för kuk, fitta, hora eller liknande?
5. En elev har kommenterat eller skämtat om privata kroppsdelar (till exempel snopp/snippa, rumpa och bröst) eller om sex?
6. En elev har visat, skickat eller gett en annan elev bilder eller meddelanden som har med nakenhet eller sex att göra?

Svarsalternativ: 1 = *aldrig*, 2 = *en gång*, 3 = *några gånger* 4 = *många gånger*

## Peer Sexual Harassment Scale – Child, English Translation

### *Victimization*

The questions are about things you don't want to happen or that do not feel right. Think back to what it was like when you were in year four. Has another student done any of these things to you when you did not want it?

1. Touched your private parts (for example, penis, vulva, bottom, or breasts)?
2. Kissed or hugged you, or tried to do so?
3. Called you homo, fag, lesbian/dyke, or the like?
4. Called you dick, cunt, slut, or the like?
5. Commented on or joked about private parts (for example, penis, vulva, bottom, or breasts) or about sex?
6. Shown, sent, or given you pictures or messages related to nakedness or sex?

Response alternatives 1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times*, and 4 = *several times*

### *Perpetrators*

Now we would like to know if you have yourself done any of the things listed here to another student when they did not want you to? Have you ...

1. Touched another student's private parts (for example, penis, vulva, bottom, or breasts)?
2. Kissed or hugged another student, or tried to do so?
3. Called another student homo, fag, lesbian, or the like?
4. Called another student dick, cunt, slut, or the like?
5. Commented on or joked about private parts (for example, penis, vulva, bottom, and breasts) or about sex?
6. Shown, sent, or given another student pictures or messages related to nakedness or sex?

Response alternatives 1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times*, and 4 = *several times*

*Witnessing*

Have you seen or heard that any of this has happened to any other student at the school when they did not want it? Think back to what it was like when you were in year 4. Have you seen or heard that...

1. A student touched another student's private parts (for example, penis, vulva, bottom, or breasts)?
2. A student kissed or cuddled another student, or tried to do so?
3. A student called another student homo, fag, lesbian, or the like?
4. A student called another student dick, cunt, slut, or the like?
5. A student commented on or joked about private parts (for example, penis, vulva, bottom, or breasts) or about sex?
6. A student showed, sent, or gave another student pictures or messages related to nakedness or sex?

Response alternatives 1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times*, and 4 = *several times*

## Appendix

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- I. Valik, A., Holmqvist Gattario, K., Lunde, C., & Skoog, T. (2023). PSH-C: A Measure of Peer Sexual Harassment Among Children. *Journal of Social Issues*, 79, 1123–1146. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12517>
- II. Valik, A., Lunde, C., & Skoog, T., & Holmqvist Gattario, K. (2024). Peer Sexual Harassment Among 10-Year-Olds: Roles, Genders, Classroom Occurrence, and Associations with Emotional Problems. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 00, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12921>
- III. Valik, A., Lunde, C., Skoog, T., & Holmqvist Gattario, K. (2024). *The Development of Peer Sexual Harassment Victimization and Emotional Problems Across Early Adolescence*. Manuscript submitted for publication.





This doctoral thesis aimed to address peer sexual harassment during the transition from childhood to adolescence. Together, the three included studies provide a nuanced understanding of peer sexual harassment during this sensitive developmental period, offering both conceptual and empirical contributions to the literature. Furthermore, the thesis underscores the need for targeted peer-sexual-harassment interventions that consider both developmental and contextual factors.



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