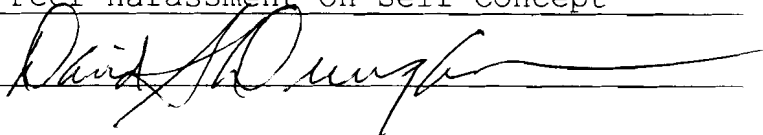AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Brenda L. Buchanan-Weintraub for the Master of Science

in Psychology presented on July 7, 1999

Title: The Effect of Peer Harassment on Self-Concept

Abstract approved: _____

Past studies have examined a variety of factors
involved in the harassment of peers such as age, gender,
education, and the role of the aggressor, but not the
self-concept of students who have been harassed by their
peers. This study investigated whether a student who has
been harassed would have a lower self-concept than a student
who has not been harassed. For the purpose of this study,
self-concept and harassment of college freshman and
sophomores were examined. One hundred twenty-five students
were given a short demographic survey and the Assessment of
Interpersonal Relations (AIR). This instrument evaluated
the quality of relationships adolescents have with the most
significant individuals in their lives on a four point
Likert-formatted scale. A 2 by 2 analysis of variance
(ANOVA) was performed with gender and the presence or
absence of harassment as the independent variables. No
significant main effects or interactions were found between
gender and harassment. Further research could benefit from
a larger sample size of students who have been harassed.

Also, recruiting participants from high school and middle
school might provide a different picture of peer
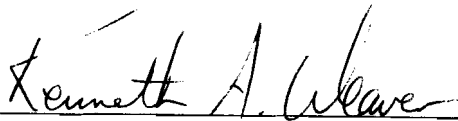relationships while harassment is occurring.

THE EFFECT OF PEER HARASSMENT

ON

SELF-CONCEPT

———————

A Thesis

Presented to

the Division of Psychology and
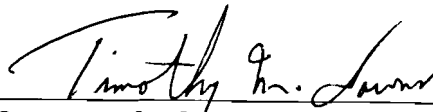
Special Education

Emporia State University

———————

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

———————

By

Brenda L. Buchanan-Weintraub

August 1999

Kenneth A. Weave
Approval for the Division of
Psychology and Special Education

Timothy M. Downs
Approval for the Graduate Council

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my husband, David, for his belief in me, his words of encouragement and his loving support, and my family for not giving up that I would one day finish this thesis. I would also like to thank my thesis committee for its help and advice. This thesis could not have been done without the help and love of all these people. Thank you!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All through life friendships and relationships have a significantly impact self-concept. Our experiences influence our decisions. The home environment gives children a view of themselves, their families and the world around them. In turn, "the family forms the foundation of a person's experience in the social world" (Chubb & Fertman, 1992, p. 387). School and social interactions greatly affect the way we learn to deal with others.

Today, students stay in school longer than they ever have. A person spends approximately 1,116 hours a year at school, which equals 13,392 hours for 12 years of education. The number of after school and community activities students participate in guarantee the student will spend a tremendous amount of time with similar age peers, who are people of the same rank, value, quality and ability according to Guralnik (1984).

According to symbolic interaction theory, "people learn who they are from the way significant others respond to them" (Margolin, Blyth, & Carbone, 1988, p. 211). Adolescents tend to spend more time with peers rather than interact with family or spend time alone. Teenagers are more likely to share different thoughts and experience

higher levels of intimacy with their peers as compared to their parents.

One's perceptions of self can be "derived from interactions with significant others, self-attributions, and overall experiential aspects of the social environment" (Byrne & Shavelson, 1986, p. 474). Many students experience peer harassment. Harassment by significant others can lower an individual's self-concept. Harassment is defined as crucifying, taunting or antagonizing another individual by isolated or repeated raids or attacks, . Miller and Rubin (1990) defined a victim as "a child who has suffered as the result of isolated or repeated attacks, confrontations, or transgressions by another child" (p. 1). Harassment violations include bullying, ridiculing, teasing, verbal threats or physical assaults.

Since the mid-80's, our society has become more aware of the problems people are having with their self-concepts, which affects their relationships with others (Moran & Eckenrode, 1991). "Interpersonal relations are developmental in the sense that they, like most human characteristics, change and become increasingly differentiated with age" (Bracken, 1993, p. 4). Shapiro and Dominial (1990) reported that a person who has been harassed slowly recognizes and experiences the damage an abusive situation has done to the "self". Previous research has

focused on the aggressor in harassment situations, not the victim. The purpose of this study is to determine what effect peer harassment has on a student's self-concept.

Literature Review

This literature review will give information involving the effects peer harassment can have on different individuals. According to cognitive social learning theory, behavior is learned through instruction, social modeling and direct exposure to the consequences of one's actions. Immediate or short-term consequences will have the greatest influence on future behavior.

Adolescence starts with the beginning of pubertal changes and lasts until the individual reaches the mid-20's (Ellis & Davis, 1982). Adolescence is considered as the period from 12 through 19 years of age. Ongoing changes include emotional, cognitive and physiological differences. These changes do not take place because a youth reaches a certain age, but appear to be age related rather than age specific (Ellis & Davis, 1982).

As adolescents grow, they have the cognitive ability to consider the impact their actions will have on others and themselves. Adolescents tend to react to social standards, rather than morals or values. Social learning theorists believe that adolescents have already gained independence and have chosen their friends. Peers contribute to an

adolescent's sense of self-worth. The contact peers have with friends serves many functions in the lives and development of children (Asher & Coie, 1990). Asher (1990) also reported that peers serve in many important roles in adolescents' lives: companions, sharing advice, trusted confidants and critics, and loyal allies providing stability in times of stress. The self-concept of boys and girls also tends to be multi-dimensional (Byrne & Shavelson, 1987). There appear to be changes in the self-concept during adolescence representing an expansion of awareness of the self and the world (Ellis et al., 1982).

Children learn to understand their social environment at the same time as they are developing a self-concept. Self-concept is how one views oneself. Obiakor and Stile (1993) define self-concept as "an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors" (p. 3). Self-esteem, self-knowledge and self-ideal are believed to be the key aspects of self-concept. Individuals may believe self-descriptions of themselves whether they are true or not. The power of suggestion may be a strong influence on individuals with a low self-concept. Children see themselves as they believe they are seen. According to Grayston, DeLuca, and Boyes (1992), "self-concept and self-esteem, though intimately related, may actually represent two different entities" (p. 279). As Grayston et

al. (1992) pointed out, self-concept may be viewed as the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings, whereas self-esteem may be viewed as a small portion of this larger whole. Adolescents who experience maltreatment during childhood are less likely to have lower self-esteem than teenagers who first experience maltreatment during adolescence (Moran et al., 1991).

Time alone does not heal the maltreatment. Symptoms may increase over time. These adolescents who have been harassed could have trouble giving and receiving affection because they were betrayed as children. According to Perry, Kusel and Perry (1988), the chances of being singled out for aggression do not appear to decrease with age. Perry et al. also reported that physical abuse decreases but verbal abuse remains high throughout all ages. Research indicates within educational environments, poor adolescent interpersonal relations have been found to be related to aggression, school dropout, behavior problems, learning disabilities, juvenile crime and social isolation. Some of the most common actions seen are aggressiveness, acting out, displacement, and regressive states. Research shows that academically, individuals with poor interpersonal relations "are at risk for dropping out of school and being identified as behaviorally disturbed, learning disabled, and socially isolated" (Bracken, 1993, p. 2). Morgan and Eckenrode

(1991) reported serious problems such as delinquency and drug abuse could become problems for adolescents who are neglected or rejected by peers. Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, and Gariepy (1988) reported "aggressive acts are correlated with social rejection and that rejection is correlated with the continuation of aggressive behavior" (p. 815). The type and extent of psychopathology associated with peer rejection could depend on whether the child's problem is one of aggression, one of victimization, or a combination of the two (Perry et al., 1988).

"The identity development process does not appear to be differentiated by gender" (Streitmatter, 1993, p. 64). Women attach greater importance to reflected appraisals than men, and men attach greater importance to social comparisons than women (Schwalbe & Staples, 1991). Women tend to conceptualize who they are by their ability to make and maintain relationships (Streitmatter, 1993). Men appear to use a separate or objective self-characterization. Research indicates identity development may be a more complicated process for girls. Boys are thought to be the victims of aggression more often than girls. Bracken (1993) reported "because positive interpersonal relations are foundations to healthy social and emotional development and adjustment, youth with problematic interpersonal relations must be identified early so appropriate therapeutic interventions

can be provided" (p. 2). Group intervention techniques are helpful for building self-concept.

Summary

There are many environmental conditions and learning experiences that will guide each individual through life. Because the home environment is the basis for our view of ourselves and others as well as society and the world in general, it is important to develop a good self-concept (Kashani et al., 1992).

All acts of interpersonal aggression involve two individuals, an aggressor and a victim. Most research is dedicated to understanding the aggressor, not the victim. The present study tested the hypothesis that there would be a difference between the self-concept of students who have been harassed as compared to the self-concept of students who have not been harassed.

The insight gained from the research will hopefully result in information that can assist young people in improving their self-concepts. It would demonstrate the kinds of effects peer harassment has on the overall outlook a person has on his or her self-concept. The knowledge gained from this type of study would prove helpful in working with students who have a low self-concept as a result of harassment.

CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

Database

The sample for this study was drawn from Emporia State University's Psychology and Special Education students in Emporia, Kansas. An intact group was used rather than a random sample to ensure that the number of participants was sufficient for statistical analysis. One hundred twenty-five participants volunteered for the study in order to fulfill their research requirements for their general and developmental psychology classes. There were 45 male and 80 female participants who were 18 and 19 years old. Twenty-six of the participants reported being harassed, 16 were females and 10 were males.

Permission to conduct the research and collect the data was obtained from Emporia State University's Human Subject Review Board. The participants were given a consent form (See Appendix A) to sign in order to take part in the research. They also were given a demographic questionnaire (See Appendix B) and testing booklet to complete at their own pace.

Design

The research method for this study is quasi-experimental because of the use of an intact group.

The independent variables were harassment (present or absent) and gender. The dependent variable was the participant's score on the male and female peer subscales for the self-concept inventory. The results from this study will generalize to other students and young adult populations with similar demographics.

Materials

Assessment of Interpersonal Relations (AIR). The AIR (Bracken, 1993) is a 35 item questionnaire designed to evaluate the relationships adolescents have with the most significant individuals in their lives. Participants respond to each question on a four point Likert scale from 4 (positive) to 1 (negative). There is no neutral response option, which creates a forced choice response format. Scores range from 35 to 140 with higher scores meaning a more positive self-concept.

The AIR has both positively and negative by connoted items. Each requires different scoring procedures. Positively worded items are scored as: SA=4, A=3, D=2, SD=1. The negative connotations are scored in the reverse order: SA=1, A=2, D=3, SD=4. There are only 7 negative connotations out of the 35 items. To compute the raw score sum for each subscale, add the positive and negative sums together. This creates the total raw score for the AIR which is also the TRI raw score. Thus, scores range from 35

to 140 for determining the standard score for each scale,
find the appropriate age and gender in Appendix 2 of the
examiner's manual. The five subscales raw scores are also
converted to standard scores. Two out of the five
relationship types, male and female peers, were used along
with the TRI for statistical purposes. All five
relationship subscales added together make up the TRI.

AIR is an instrument that reflects the behavioral
theory of the Multi-dimensional Self-Concept Scale (MSCS)
and assesses five relationship types in the three context
domains of family (parents), social (peers), and academics
(teachers). These three domains reflect four types of
social support: esteem support, informational support,
instrumental support, and companionship support. The five
relationship types are mother, father, male peers, female
peers, and teachers. The mother and father subscales
examine the students' perceptions of the nature and quality
of the behaviors that are shared between them and their
parents. The male and female peer subscales examine the
adolescents' perceptions of the relationships with their
peers. The teacher subscale examines the adolescents'
perceived relations with their teachers, either individually
or collectively, depending on the school setting.

The three context domains the AIR examines are family
(parents or caregiver), social (peers), and academic

(teachers). The context domains were created from the three groups in which children spend the majority of their time. It is from these three domains children develop strong relationships with parents, peers and teachers. These three contexts can be combined to assess adolescence's functioning within and across the domains. The domains also overlap one another to a certain degree to create the overall pattern of interpersonal relations. The total relationship index (TRI) is a composite of the five subscales. It is the most reliable AIR score. Students' responses create individual subscale scores from the five relationship types. The five relationship subscales are combined to create TRI. TRI gives the overall level of interpersonal relations. The TRI standard score is obtained by finding the TRI raw score.

The AIR was standardized by using 2,501 children and adolescents between the ages of 9 and 19 years. The sample came from 17 school systems in four major geographic regions of the United States. All major ethnic groups and children of both genders were included in the group administered sample. Participants were enrolled in both regular and special education classes. No one was excluded from participation due to exceptionality.

Bracken (1993) reported the TRI coefficient alphas to be .96 at each grade level. The TRI coefficient for all the

standardized sample is r = .96. The five subscales show
internal consistency that exceed .90, no matter what the
child's age or gender.

The AIR was co-normed with the Multi-dimensional Self
Concept Scale (MSCS). AIR construct validity was shown in
part through convergent and discriminant correlation's
between the AIR and MSCS (Bracken, 1994). The AIR subscales
and the six context dependent subscales of the MSCS (i.e.,
Social, Affect, Competence, Academic, Family and Physical)
correlated in a predictable fashion. The AIR mother (r =
.67) and father (r = .57) subscales correlated the highest
with the MSCS Family scale; the AIR male peers (r = .36) and
female peers (r = .78) subscales correlated the highest with
MSCS Social scale; and the AIR teacher (r = .32) subscale,
in addition to the mother (r = .32) and father (r = .30)
subscales, correlated the highest with the MSCS Academic
scale instead of either peer scale.

Procedure

A participant consent form (See Appendix A) was
completed by all subjects prior to administering the
questionnaire and testing booklet. Participant consent
forms explained that subjects were encouraged to take part
in the study, but that they were allowed to decline and
could withdraw at any time. Participants were advised that

all materials collected were considered confidential and the
information provided would only be identified by a code
number. Additional information could be obtained about the
study from the examiner. Any participant who expressed an
interest would be debriefed on the purpose and results of
the study after it was complete.

The AIR and demographic questionnaire were administered
to a sample of 18 and 19 year old men and women who had
given consent. The AIR and demographic questionnaire were
identified by a code number assigned by the researcher to
ensure confidentiality of the participants. Each student
received a questionnaire and testing booklet from the
researcher and was instructed to complete each
questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire (See Appendix
B) provided general information concerning the participants.
They completed a self-report concerning their past
experience with harassment. Participants were asked whether
they had been harassed during middle school and high school.
If they had, they responded to other questions concerning
who they were harassed by, how often, and at what age the
harassment took place. Each subject was assigned a code
number to ensure confidentiality. The administration of
each testing session required 20 to 25 minutes to complete.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

The AIR profiles was analyzed through a 2 by 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA). The ANOVA was used in order to provide significant statistical power and speed of processing to this study. The specific hypothesis being tested was students who have been harassed will have a lower self-concept than students who have not been harassed. Harassment and gender were the independent variables. The dependent variable was the participant's score on the male and female peer subscales for the self-concept inventory.

When the participants were asked to respond to questions regarding their male peers, the results for analysis failed to reveal a significant effect for Gender, $F(1,121) = 1.86$, $p < 18$. There were non-significant results for Harassment, $F(1,121) = .43$, $p < .51$. Nonsignificant results were also found for the Gender by Harassment interaction, $F(1,121) = .01$, $p < .90$. Tables 1 and 2 provide the results of the analysis for male peers.

When the participants were asked to respond to questions regarding their female peers, the results of the analysis failed to reveal a significant effect for Gender, $F(1,121) = .69$, $p < .41$. There were non-significant results for Harassment, $F(1,121) = .32$, $p < .58$. Nonsignificant results were found for Gender by Harassment interaction,

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for AIR Male Peer Scores by Gender and Harassment

Group	n	M	SD
Male Peers			
Women	80	104.03	11.84
Men	45	100.31	13.35
Female Peers			
Women	80	104.65	14.70
Men	45	98.67	14.71
Total Relationship Index			
Women	80	105.01	10.92
Men	45	103.02	11.55

Table 2

Analysis of Variance for AIR Scores When Considering Male

Peers

Souce	df	SS	MS	F
G	1	289.88	289.88	1.86
H	1	66.79	66.79	.43
G X H	1	2.27	2.27	.01
Error	121	18850.55	155.79	

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for AIR Female Peer Scores by

Gender and Harassment

Group	$\underline{n}$	$\underline{M}$	$\underline{SD}$
Male Peers			
No	99	103.08	12.20
Yes	26	101.19	13.64
Female Peers			
No	99	103.20	14.52
Yes	26	99.81	16.39
Total Relationship Index			
No	99	104.75	10.37
Yes	26	102.58	13.81

Table 4

Analysis of Variance for AIR Scores When Considering Female
Peers

Source	df	SS	MS	F
G	1	147.30	147.30	.69
H	1	67.39	67.39	.32
G X H	1	587.30	587.30	2.76
Error	121	25788.79	213.13	

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations for AIR Total Relationship

Scores by Gender and Harassment

Group		n	M	SD
Gender	Harassment			
Male Peers				
Men	No	35	100.80	12.82
Men	Yes	10	98.60	15.75
Women	No	64	104.33	11.77
Women	Yes	16	102.81	12.42
Female Peers				
Men	No	35	97.86	14.82
Men	Yes	10	101.50	14.71
Women	No	64	106.13	13.60
Women	Yes	16	98.75	17.74
Total Relationship Index				
Men	No	35	102.46	10.89
Men	Yes	10	105.00	14.09
Women	No	64	106.00	9.94
Women	Yes	16	101.06	13.88

Table 6

Analysis of Variance for AIR Total Relationship Index Scores
by Gender and Harassment

Source	df	SS	MS	F
G	1	.75	.75	.01
H	1	27.74	27.74	.22
G X H	1	270.71	270.71	2.19
Error	121	14923.62	123.34	

$F(1,121) = 2.76$, $p < .10$ (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 5 and 6 provided the results for the Total Relationship Index. The TRI failed to reveal a significant effect for Gender, $F(1,121) = .01$, $p < .94$. There were non-significant results for Harassment, $F(1,121) = .22$, $p < .64$. Nonsignificant results were found for the Gender by Harassment interaction, $F(1,121) = 2.19$, $p < .14$.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

This study compared the self-concept of men and women who have been harassed with men and women who have not been harassed and found no difference between men and women or between the harassment groups. The AIR was designed to evaluate the quality of relationships adolescents have with the most significant individuals in their lives. Student-parent relations are the strongest at a young age (Bracken, 1994). During adolescence, peers appear to be the most significant individuals in the student's life. Not all students experience satisfying relationships with peers. For those students, peer relations may be stressful and a source of anguish for them (Asher et al., 1990). According to Bracken (1994), by the time the student reaches adolescence, they progress from seeking peer acceptance to developing peer intimacy. O'Koon (1997) reported "parent attachment had a stronger relationship to well-being than did peer attachment" (p.473). O'Koon (1997) also stated emotional ties to parents are more important for attachment than proximity. Cubb et al., (1992) reported the first exposure a student has to relationships is with their families and it is essential for survival. The family relationship forms the base of the student's self-concept. If the student feels secure, he or she will have the

internal resources to build strong relationships outside the family (Cubb et al., 1992). Paterson, Pryor and Field (1995) found "parents and peers contribute to different facets of adolescent self-concept" (p. 374). Parents are not able to provide the same framework for certain aspects of growing up that friends are able to provide (Paterson et al., 1995).

Although the hypothesis was not supported by the data collected in this experiment. The following limitations indicate the design of this study was insufficient to provide definitive answers. The first limitation was the relatively small sample size of students harassed. A second limitation unaccounted for by the experimental design was the type of participants used. Participants were recruited from introductory and developmental psychology classes and had to be 18 and 19 years of age. Younger participants, such as high school or middle school students, might have provided a different picture of peer relationships while harassment is occurring. "As a result of children's ever-expanding social networks, their relations with parents, teachers and other adults change in nature, as well as in significance, with age" (Bracken, 1994, p.15).

Perhaps there is no relationship between self-concept and peer harassment. According to Bracken (1994), it must be kept in mind that adolescent's relations change along

many dimensions with increasing age, an important variable
when evaluating the quality of adolescent social skills and
interpersonal relations. Possibly the changes in
self-concept across an adolescent age span appear to
represent an expansion of awareness of the self and the
world. Ellis et al. (1982) reported adolescents gain more
cognitive abilities to consider the consequences of their
actions as they mature. They may be able to conceptualize
their impact on others and reflect on the impact it has on
them. Ellis et al. (1982), also stated the
multi-dimensional nature of self-concept during adolescence
appear to expand, with periods of both stabilization and
reorganization. It is possible students who have been
harassed develop a stronger self-concept in response to peer
harassment.

All of these limitations could have affected the
results. It is clear that longitudinal studies are needed
to paint a fuller picture of how particular characteristics
of peer relations exert an influence on different aspects of
adolescent self-concept and how this influence changes over
time. "The quality and extent of adolescent interpersonal
relations have been shown to be related to future moral
development, emotional security, and understanding of the
social structure" (Bracken, 1994, p. 14). Further research

is recommended because of the mentioned limitations of this study.

In summary, no significant relationship was found between peer harassment and self-concept. There were no strong indications such differences would not be possible in future studies. It is hoped with further research that a clear understanding of this topic would be gained.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Informed Consent

Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Read this consent form. If you have any questions ask the experimenter and she will answer the question.

This study is to assess the attitudes of students in a midwestern university. Strict confidentiality will be used throughout the study. Names will not be used in any description or discussion of this study or in the results found. Only the experimenter will have access to the initial data collected.

This study is not a mandatory part of your curriculum. If you agree to participate you will be asked to fill out two questionnaires. If at any time you choose not to participate in this study, there will be no negative recourse taken by the experimenter.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board. It will not contain any harmful events to the subjects either physically or emotionally. If you agree participate in this study please sign the form.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, feel free to contact the experimenter. Any additional questions will require you to contact Dr. Dungan, Division of Psychology and Special Education, 303 Visser Hall, 341-5806.

Thank you for your participation.

I, _____, have read the above information and have decided to participate. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should I choose to discontinue participation in this study.

_____   _____
 (Signature of participant)   (Date)

THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED BY THE EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS.

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Male   Female

2. Age _____

3. Student Classification: Freshman   Sophomore   Junior

4. What was the size of your high school graduating class?

_____

Harassment is to trouble by isolated or repeated raids or attacks, to crucify, taunt or antagonize another individual. For example to bully, ridicule, tease, verbal threats or physical assaults.

5. Do you feel you have been harassed by your peers?

                    Yes _____   No _____

If you answered no to question 5, please stop and go on to the AIR booklet.

6. If you were harassed, to what extent?

       Rarely _____   Moderately _____   Severely _____

7. When were you bothered most by your peers?

            Grade School _____   Jr. High _____

            High School _____   College _____

8. By whom were you harassed?

       An individual _____   A group _____   Other _____

9. If you were harassed by a group, how many were in the group? _____

10. To what extent did the harassment affect you?

_____

_____

_____

_____

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