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Peer Victimization of Sexual Minority and Transgender Youth: A Cross-Sectional Study of High School Students

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Abstract

Objective: To identify rates of victimization experiences by gender identity and sexual orientation in a large regional sample of 14-to-17-year old high school students.

Method: All 10th grade students from 27 Northeastern high schools were invited to participate in a survey of dating and sexual experiences (N = 2,766).

Results: Compared with heterosexual youth, sexual minority youth reported greater peer victimization of every kind (i.e., bullying, sexual harassment, unwanted sexual contact and intercourse, and every type of dating conflict [threatening behavior, physical abuse, and sexual abuse]). Sexual minority girls evinced particularly high levels of bullying. Similarly, transgender youth were more likely than nontransgender youth to experience every form of peer victimization except physical abuse in a dating relationship. Cumulatively, 91% of sexual minority girls, 86% of transgender youth, and 79% of sexual minority boys experienced at least one form of peer victimization, compared to 78% of heterosexual girls and 63% of heterosexual boys. Further, 14% of transgender youth experienced all 4 victimization types in the past year alone. Finally, bias-based harassment was rarely the only form of victimization experienced by these youth.

Conclusion: The victimization of sexual minority youth, particularly girls, and transgender youth was pervasive across individual forms of victimization and multiple forms of victimization concurrently. Further, bias-based harassment was imbedded within a pattern of victimization, such that youth experienced it in concert with multiple other forms of victimization. Researchers implementing prevention-based programs for interpersonal violence should examine the experiences of and impact on youth of diverse gender and sexual identities.

Keywords

sexual minority youth; transgender youth; peer victimization; dating violence

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Peer victimization, including bullying, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and dating violence, is a serious public health problem among adolescents that is associated with long-term negative sequelae, including problematic substance use, suicidal ideation, depression, and posttraumatic symptomatology (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008). Each type of peer victimization is often studied separately (i.e., siloed), but youth rarely experience each type of victimization in isolation (Evans & Chapman, 2014). For example, 10% of adolescents have experienced 15 or more forms of victimization, including physical assault, child maltreatment, and bullying (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2009). It is important to conduct nonsiloed victimization research because many youth experience multiple types of victimization, and experiencing multiple types of victimization is associated with greater distress (Finkelhor et al., 2009).

This nonsiloed approach to studying victimization types is also needed among groups that are at greater risk for victimization overall, such as sexual minority (i.e., youth who report same-sex sexual attraction and behavior or nonheterosexual identity) and transgender youth (i.e., youth who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth and can include youth who identify as transgender, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, nonbinary and agender; Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Ramirez, 2017). Much of this research has focused on bias-based harassment (i.e., based on sexual orientation, gender/gender identity/gender expression). However, violence prevention scholars are increasingly positioning bias-based harassment within the broader context of interpersonal violence (Miller, 2018), in part because adolescents who engage in bias-based harassment are also more likely to perpetrate sexual harassment and sexual violence (Espelage, Basile, De La Rue, & Hamburger, 2014; Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012). Further, bias-based harassment is only one type victimization among a constellation of victimization perpetrated against sexual minority and transgender youth (Day, Perez-Brumer, Russell, 2018; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011). Sexual minority and transgender youth experience higher rates of every type of peer victimization – bullying (Kann et al., 2016), sexual harassment (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014), sexual violence (Kann et al., 2016; Rothman et al., 2012), and dating violence (Dank, Lachman, Zweig, & Yahner, 2014; Espelage, Merrin, & Hatchel, 2018) – compared to heterosexual and nontransgender youth, respectively.

Given that sexual minority and transgender youth experience higher rates of most forms of victimization, the siloed approach might obscure the full scope of victimization these youth experience. In the only set of studies to establish rates of polyvictimization among sexual and gender minority youth, Sterzing and colleagues (2019) and Sterzing, Ratliff, Gartner, McGeough, and Johnson (2017) examined adolescent and young adult sexual and gender minorities' experiences with crime, child maltreatment, peer victimization, sexual victimization, and indirect victimization in their communities. Polyvictimization was alarmingly prevalent, with 41% of respondents experiencing 15 or more forms of victimization in their lifetime. This study will complement this research on polyvictimization by assessing peer victimization types concurrently to determine whether rates of peer violence differ based on sexual identity and gender identity.

This study will also address several remaining gaps in the research. There is a need for polyvictimization research that (a) includes heterosexual youth in nonconvenience samples

to establish comparative victimization estimates; (b) examines the intersection of sexual orientation and gender to identify specific groups at risk for harm; and (c) assesses understudied forms of victimization, such as dating conflict and sexual harassment, which are particularly deleterious for sexual minority women (Edwards, Sylaska, & Neal, 2015).

First, the only studies examining polyvictimization (lifetime: Sterzing et al., 2019; past year: Sterzing et al., 2017) sampled only sexual and gender minority individuals. Surveys which sample exclusively from organizations that serve sexual and gender minority populations do not allow for a comparison with heterosexual and cisgender individuals, respectively. This approach restricts the understanding of differences based on sexual orientation and gender, and thus also of explanatory mechanisms. Further, this community-based sampling strategy has lower external validity, because participants in these convenience-based methods might differ from those recruited from community settings, such as schools, where all members of a community regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity are invited to participate in the research.

Second, the majority of research on victimization has typically collapsed categories of sexual minority status across genders (e.g., Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Sterzing et al., 2019), and research that has examined gender differences has produced discrepant results. For example, meta-analyses suggest that sexual minority boys appear to be particularly at risk for experiencing school-based peer victimization compared to their heterosexual peers (Toomey & Russell, 2016). However, in a sample of only sexual minority youth, Sterzing et al. (2017) found few differences between sexual minority girls and boys in terms of polyvictimization rates. Therefore, it remains unclear whether specific types of peer victimization (e.g., bullying, sexual violence) differ as a function of both sexual orientation and gender.

Third, and relatedly, it is important to provide in-depth assessments of each type of victimization using established measures, including understudied types of victimization (i.e., dating conflict, sexual harassment, sexual violence). It is important to assess understudied forms of peer victimization when examining gender by sexual orientation risk, because (a) girls have a greater risk for these types of victimization and experience different long-term outcomes than boys (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013), such as a more negative impact of sexual harassment victimization (Gruber & Fineran, 2008); and (b) sexual minority women specifically have a pronounced risk of experiencing dating conflict (Conron, Mimiaga, & Landers, 2010) and sexual victimization (Rothman et al., 2012). Research is needed to clarify if these disparities are prevalent at even younger ages. Therefore, this study complements the broad scope of Sterzing et al. (2017, 2019) by focusing on peer victimization to provide greater depth. For example, this study utilized full measures of sexual harassment and dating conflict rather than single items assessing verbal sexual harassment or physical dating violence (as in Sterzing et al., 2017, 2019).

Purpose of the Present Study

The present study examines experiences of polyvictimization (i.e., multiple victimizations of different types) among sexual minority and transgender youth, populations at higher

risk to experience violence (Kann et al., 2016). The current study addresses the three aforementioned gaps in the literature by examining rates of various forms of victimization (bullying, bias-based verbal harassment, sexual harassment, sexual assault and unwanted touching, and dating conflict) among a sample of 2,766 adolescents aged 14–17 attending 27 high schools in the northeastern United States. In doing so, this research not only examines multiple forms of victimization to identify specific risks based on sexual orientation and gender identity but also establishes a picture of global risk across multiple types of victimization. Specifically, whereas Sterzing et al. (2019) established that sexual and gender minority young adults frequently experience multiple forms of harm, this study complements these findings by including heterosexual youth as a comparative sample, assessing additional forms of peer victimization, and by using broader measures than single-item measures of victimization. Several specific hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Individual Types of Peer Victimization:

Sexual minority youth and transgender youth will report greater peer victimization (i.e., bullying, bias-based verbal harassment, sexual harassment, sexual victimization, dating conflict) than heterosexual youth and nontransgender-identified youth, respectively.

Hypothesis 2: Overlap between Bias-Based and General Peer Victimization:

Sexual minority youth and transgender youth will rarely experience bias-based discrimination alone; rather, the majority will experience other forms of peer victimization as well.

Hypothesis 3: Polyvictimization Rates:

Excluding bias-based forms of victimization, sexual minority youth and transgender youth will report a greater number of concurrent peer victimization types compared to their heterosexual and nontransgender peers, respectively.

Methods

Procedure

The current study utilizes the baseline survey administered as a part of a larger intervention study targeting sexual and dating violence prevention in high schools. This study was approved by the local Institutional Review Board, the state's Department of Education, and the individual school boards of each school. All 10th-grade students, across 27 high schools, were invited to participate in this study. The sample included 4 private schools (14.8%), 9 public schools (33.3%), and 14 charter schools (51.8%). All 10th-grade students completed baseline surveys assessing experiences with violence (e.g., bullying, sexual/dating violence). Parents and guardians were given the opportunity to opt their child out of the study.

Students completed the 45–60-minute survey in health or physical education classes, or during other time periods designated by the school via laptops and paper and pencil surveys. Students who were opted out of the study were given alternate tasks to complete. At least one research staff was present during survey administration, verbally completed the study assent form with the students, and answered any questions. The staff informed the students

that the survey was anonymous and voluntary. To facilitate their privacy, students were spread out across the rooms and instructed not to talk during the administration. Surveys were entered into SPSS via a team of trained staff and checked to ensure accuracy.

Participants

Participants included 2,766 adolescents ages 14–17 (M = 15.4, SD = 0.5). Half of the sample (51%; n = 1415) identified as female, 46% as male (n = 1273), 1% (n = 21) as transgender, 2% (n = 50) indicated they preferred not to report their gender, and <1% (n = 7) did not answer the question. The majority identified as heterosexual (85%; n = 2337), 2% as gay/lesbian (n = 61), 1% as queer (n = 35), 7% as bisexual (n = 190), and 4% preferred not to report their sexual orientation (n = 119). One-third (33.2%; n = 783) of students reported receiving free or reduced priced lunch, which is a proxy for socio-economic status. Local review boards barred questions assessing race and ethnicity, as it was believed these items could identify students in small educational settings, thereby jeopardizing the anonymity of the survey. Based on publicly available school reports, 33.5% of the students enrolled in schools participating in the study were considered to be a member of a racial or ethnic minority group.

Measures

Sexual orientation and gender identity.—Participants responded to a single question assessing their sexual identity (“Would you describe yourself as…”) with five response choices: heterosexual, gay/lesbian, queer, bisexual, and prefer not to answer. For all analyses, sexual identity was dichotomized to reflect heterosexual versus sexual minority identity (i.e., gay/lesbian, queer, or bisexual) and excluding those who preferred not to answer. Participants responded to a single question assessing their gender identity (“What is your gender?”) with four response choices: boy, girl, transgender, and prefer not to answer. As there were too few transgender students to examine differences by sexual orientation and gender identity, youth reporting a transgender identity were compared to youth who identified as boys or girls, resulting in two separate contrasts for each gender-based regression analysis. Similar to the coding of sexual identity, those who preferred not to answer were excluded from analyses, because the meaning of this category was not clear (e.g., were they questioning their identity; identifying as gender nonconforming but not transgender; or did they simply wish not to answer this question specifically?). For that reason, the terminology “nontransgender” is used.

Bullying victimization.—Participants responded to five questions from the School Crime Supplement of the National Crime Victimization Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014); these items assessed bullying victimization over the past 6 months, indicating whether other students made fun of them or spread rumors, threatened them with harm, physically hit or spat on them, or excluded them purposefully. Participants indicated whether they experienced each item never, 1–2 times, 3–4 times, or 5+ times. These items were summed to give an overall bullying score in the past 6 months (α = 0.81). Consistent with the uniform definition of bullying (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2104) bullying was defined for students as causing harm or distress (i.e., “These questions are about what students do at school to make you feel bad or what students do at school that

is hurtful to you") and involving a power imbalance. The definitions of bullying continue to advance (Lessne & Cidade, 2017).

Bias-based verbal harassment.—One question within the assessment of sexual harassment (Taylor, Stein, Woods, & Mumford, 2011) assessed bias-based verbal harassment ("Said you were gay or a lesbian, as an insult"). Participants indicated the frequency with which they experienced victimization as follows: a boy/girl did this to me, but not in the past 6 months; 0 times in the past 6 months; 1–3 times; 4–9 times; 10+ times. This single item was dichotomized to reflect whether individuals experienced this type of bias-based harassment. Although this measured only harassment as a function of perceived sexual orientation, and not gender, prior research demonstrates that both sexual minority and transgender students are more likely to experience this form of harassment than heterosexual students (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018).

Sexual harassment victimization.—The sexual harassment measure utilized by Taylor et al. (2011; and freely available online) consisted of 14 items designed to assess sexual harassment victimization in the past 6 months perpetrated by a male peer and perpetrated by a female peer. After examining the bias-based item separately, this measure resulted in 13 unique items for male perpetrator(s) and female perpetrator(s), resulting in 26 items total. Participants indicated the frequency with which they experienced victimization as follows: a boy/girl did this to me, but not in the past 6 months; 0 times in the past 6 months; 1–3 times; 4–9 times; 10+ times. Sexual harassment victimization included verbal (i.e., "Made sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks about/to you?"), visual (i.e., "Showed, gave, or left you sexual pictures, photographs, messages, or notes?"), and physical tactics (i.e., "Pulled at your clothing in a sexual way?"). Items were recoded such that individuals who had not experienced that item in the past 6 months (response options 1 and 2) were recoded as zeroes. Items were then summed to give a total harassment score by boys, girls, and either. In prior work, the subscales for total summative perpetration by a male and female demonstrated adequate internal reliability (α = 0.80–0.85) (Taylor et al., 2011). In the current study, the Perpetrated by a Boy subscale (α = 0.87), Girl subscale (α = 0.92), and total scale (α = 0.92) had adequate internal reliability.

Sexual victimization.—Participants reported sexual victimization experiences in the past year in response to items utilized previously by Black et al. (2011) and adapted by Coker et al. (2015). To ensure validity of these items, stakeholders (e.g., advocates, researchers, subject matter policy experts) were convened to review and finalize the survey instrument (Black et al., 2011). Participants reported whether they had experienced unwanted sexual intercourse, defined as vaginal and anal sex, as well as unwanted sexual activity (including kissing, touching, and oral sex, but not intercourse) perpetrated by another high school student and achieved by verbal coercion ("How many times have you [Had sexual intercourse/Been involved in sexual activity (but not sexual intercourse)] even though you didn't really want to because another high school student threatened to end your friendship or romantic relationship if you didn't or because you felt pressured by the other person's constant arguments or begging?"), threats or the use of physical force ("How many times have you had sexual intercourse even though you didn't really want to because another high

school student threatened to use or used physical force (like twisting your arm, holding you down)?"), or due to the use of alcohol or other drugs ("How many times have you [Had sexual intercourse/Been involved in sexual activity (but not sexual intercourse)] with another high school student when you didn't want to because you were drunk or using drugs?"). Experiences of sexual victimization were dichotomized to reflect the presence or absence of (a) any unwanted sexual contact and (b) unwanted sexual intercourse.

Dating conflict.—Three complete subscales from the Conflicts in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (see full scales in Wolfe et al., 2001) scale were administered to assess for conflict within dating relationships within the past year. Specifically, the subscales assessed the experience of Threatening Behavior (4 items; "He/she threatened to hurt me"; $\alpha = 0.78$), Physical Abuse (4 items; e.g., "He/she slapped me or pulled my hair"; $\alpha = 0.87$), and Sexual Abuse (4 items; e.g., "He/she touched me sexually when I didn't want him/her to"; $\alpha = 0.78$). The Conflicts in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory has adequate convergent validity (as assessed by agreement between self-reported perpetration and partner-reported victimization) (Wolfe et al., 2001). Analyses were restricted to those adolescents who reported that they had been in a dating relationship within the past year (64% of respondents). Based on the zero-inflated nature of this variable, these variables were dichotomized to reflect the presence/absence of partner violence.

Polyvictimization.—To explore cumulative victimization, a single victimization variable was calculated from the aforementioned forms of nonbias-based victimization (bullying, sexual harassment, dating conflict – sexual, physical, threatening – and unwanted sexual intercourse) reflecting whether participants had experienced zero to four types of victimization in the past 6–12 months. Given the expectation that bias-based victimization would be pronounced among sexual minority and transgender students, the item assessing bias-based harassment was not included in the calculation of the polyvictimization variable so as not to overinflate rates of victimization among sexual minority and transgender youth.

Data Analysis Plan

A series of linear mixed effects regressions (LMER) and generalized linear mixed effects regressions (GLMERs; Hedeker, 2005) controlling for age and clustered by school were performed to examine whether sexual minority (vs. heterosexual) and transgender (vs. nontransgender) individuals were more likely to experience each type of victimization. Analyses were performed in R version 3.5.1 (R Core Team, 2017), and graphs were produced using the package ggplot2 (Wickham, 2009). GLMERs were performed for dichotomous victimization variables (i.e., bias-based harassment; sexual victimization; dating conflict; sexual harassment) and LMERs for continuous outcomes (i.e., bullying; polyvictimization). All analyses first modeled the main effects for sexual orientation and gender. Models then explored the interaction between sexual orientation and gender. Fixed effects are presented here.

Data were more likely to be missing on latter parts of the survey, such that there was less than 0.5% of missing data on the bullying measure (queried first) but 3% missing data on the sexual violence measure (asked later in the survey). In line with the focus on prevalence

of victimization, all measures but the bullying measure were dichotomized. This approach also functioned to maximize yield from available data, in that a respondent who replied affirmatively to any item was considered positive for that outcome and retained for data analyses. Missing data were handled through listwise deletion.

However, there was substantial missing data on the sexual harassment measure, specifically by perpetrators of the same gender. Nearly one-third of boys (29%) and girls (29%) did not complete the sexual harassment measure for perpetrators of their same gender. These surveys were not completed in whole, restricting our ability to utilize multiple imputation or other methods. Therefore, we created a composite across boys' and girls' perpetration. Taylor et al. (2011), the source material for this survey, do not report on the amount of missing data. It is possible that our lack of an "ever" response block led to students being unsure how to respond to these questions if they had not experienced these items. Taylor et al. assessed whether a male or female peer had "ever" perpetrated each item, after which they then assessed the frequency of each item ("zero"; "1 to 3"; "4 to 9"; "10 or more"). In contrast, we assessed both "ever" and frequency within one set of response options. The first response option was, "A [boy/girl] did this to me, but not in the past 6 months," followed by the same 4 frequency response options from Taylor et al. ("zero"; "1 to 3"; "4 to 9"; "10 or more"). Missing respondents might correspond to students who had not experienced sexual harassment from same-gender peers, suggesting these results would overestimate the prevalence of sexual harassment. However, the rates of sexual harassment (43% of boys; 63% of girls) observed in this sample are similar to those observed in other work with high school students (e.g., 33% of boys, 65% of girls: Young, Grey, & Boyd, 2009; 43% of boys and 44% of girls in grade 9: Chiodo et al., 2009). Further, importantly for the current study, missingness on this measure did not vary as a function of sexual orientation (boys: $\chi^2(1) = 0.05$, $p = 0.82$; girls: $\chi^2(1) = 0.22$, $p = 0.82$).

As these analyses represent a secondary data analysis, power was not calculated a priori in order to drive the data collection based on gender and sexual identity. Nevertheless, the small number of transgender students in the sample is particularly concerning for power in these models, and post hoc power commentary is provided below when reviewing the results for dating conflict, as this further limited the sample of transgender students and therefore presented the smallest cell sizes for analysis.

Results

Ten percent of the youth identified as a sexual minority, and there was a significant gender difference, with girls being more likely to identify as sexual minorities (14%) than boys (5%), $\chi^2(4) = 61.41$, $p < .001$. Although similar proportions of boys and girls identified as gay/lesbian (2%) or queer (<1%), 10% of girls compared to 3% of boys identified as bisexual.

Hypothesis 1: Individual Types of Peer Victimization

Prevalence rates of each individual type of victimization are presented in Table 1. The rates as a function of sexual orientation and gender are reported in-text below.

Bullying victimization.—Bullying was pervasive. Overall, 45% of heterosexual boys, 58% of sexual minority boys, 61% of heterosexual girls, 78% of sexual minority girls, and 75% of transgender youth experienced at least one form of bullying in the past 6 months (Table 1).

LMEMs demonstrated that sexual minority youth experienced more bullying than their heterosexual peers (B = 0.70, 95%CI [0.07, 1.33]), and girls reported more bullying than did boys (B = 0.39, 95%CI [0.18, 0.60]). The significant interaction between gender and sexual orientation (B = 0.76, 95%CI [0.02, 1.50]) revealed that sexual minority girls reported particularly pronounced instances of bullying compared to their heterosexual female peers (Figure 1a). The simple slopes for sexual orientation as the predictor were: 1.34 + 0.70x (males), 1.73 + 1.46x (females). The intraclass correlation (ICC) for bullying, representing the proportion of variance attributable to school-level differences, was 0.02.

Transgender youth were established as the referent to determine differences between these youth and both boys and girls. Boys (B = −3.75, $p < .001$) and girls (B = −3.23, $p < .001$) reported less bullying than transgender youth. Mean levels of reported bullying in the past 6 months were 1.5 for heterosexual boys, 1.8 for heterosexual girls, 2.2 for sexual minority boys, 3.3 for sexual minority girls, and 5.4 for transgender youth, where “1” corresponded to experiencing one type of bullying 1–2 times in the last 6 months.

Bias-based verbal harassment.—The majority of youth did not report bias-based harassment (Table 1). However, sexual minority youth were more likely to report bias-based harassment than heterosexual youth (odds ratio [*OR*] = 5.43, 95%CI [3.97, 7.43]). Girls were less likely to experience bias-based harassment than boys (*OR* = 0.60, 95%CI [0.46, 0.76]). The interaction effect between gender and sexual orientation was not significant: *OR* = 1.72, 95% CI [0.88, 3.40]). The ICC for bias-based harassment, representing the proportion of variance attributable to school-level differences, was 0.04.

Transgender youth reported higher rates of harassment. Specifically, youth who identified as a girl (*OR* = 0.14, 95% CI [0.05, 0.36]) or a boy (*OR* = 0.19, 95% CI [0.07, 0.49]) were less likely to be victims of bias-based harassment than transgender youth.

Sexual harassment.—Sexual minority youth were more likely than heterosexual youth to report being sexually harassed overall (*OR* = 2.59, 95%CI [1.89, 3.61]), as well as by boys (*OR* = 2.87, 95%CI [2.10, 3.97]) or girls specifically (*OR* = 2.65, 95%CI [1.96, 3.58]). Girls were more likely to report being harassed overall than boys (*OR* = 2.00, 95%CI [1.69, 2.38]), as well as harassed specifically by boys (*OR* = 3.65, 95%CI [3.03, 4.42]). However, girls were less likely than boys to report being sexually harassed by girls (*OR* = −0.62, 95%CI [0.54, 0.79]).

GLMERs revealed no significant interaction effect for overall sexual harassment (*OR* = 0.72, 95%CI [0.36, 1.44]), such that sexual minority youth were more likely to report being sexually harassed regardless of gender. However, there were significant interaction effects for sexual harassment perpetrated by a boy (*OR* = 0.38, 95%CI [0.19, 0.75]) and girl (*OR* = 2.09, 95%CI [1.08, 4.03]). Among heterosexual youth, boys and girls were more likely

to be sexually harassed by members of the opposite gender, such that heterosexual boys and girls reported similarly low rates of sexual harassment from their own gender (28% and 29% respectively) (Table 1). For sexual harassment by boys, the simple slopes were: −1.07 + 1.38x (males); 0.63 + 0.42x (females). For sexual harassment by girls, the simple slopes were: −0.44 + 0.45x (males); - 0.93 + 1.19x (females). In contrast, sexual minority boys and girls reported high rates of sexual harassment from same-gender peers (66% and 57% respectively) (Figures 1b and 1c). The ICCs for sexual harassment perpetrated by a boy and girl were 0.02.

Boys were less likely to experience sexual harassment than transgender youth (*OR* = 0.53, 95%CI [0.08, 0.64]), although girls did not significantly differ from transgender youth. When analyzed by gender of the perpetrator, boys were less likely than transgender youth (*OR* = 0.15, 95%CI [0.05, 0.40]) to be sexually harassed by boys. Girls did not significantly differ from transgender youth in rates of sexual harassment by boys (*OR* = 0.55, 95%CI [0.18, 1.44]). Boys (*OR* = 0.34, 95%CI [0.12, 0.89]) and girls (*OR* = 0.24, 95%CI [0.08, 0.64]) were less likely than transgender youth to be sexually harassed by girls.

Sexual victimization.—Regarding unwanted intercourse specifically, sexual minority youth were more likely than heterosexual youth to have experienced unwanted sexual intercourse (*OR* = 2.50, 95%CI [1.26, 4.63]). Compared to heterosexual youth and boys, respectively, sexual minority youth (*OR* = 2.30, 95%CI [1.55, 3.35]) and girls (*OR* = 2.15, 95%CI [1.56, 3.01]) were more likely to have experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact. There were no significant interactions between sexual orientation and gender in predicting unwanted sexual intercourse (*OR* = 1.50, 95%CI [0.33, 10.72]) or any form of unwanted sexual contact (*OR* = 1.34, 95%CI [0.50, 4.26]). The ICCs for unwanted sexual contact and intercourse were 0.01.

Youth who identified as a boy (*OR* = 0.11, 95% CI [0.03, 0.49]; *OR* = 0.07, 95% CI [0.03, 0.20]) or as a girl (*OR* = 0.17, 95% CI [0.05, 0.74]; *OR* = 0.18, 95% CI [0.07, 0.49]) were significantly less likely than transgender youth to report unwanted sexual intercourse and any form of unwanted sexual contact, respectively.

Dating conflict.—These analyses were restricted to those youth reporting a dating relationship in the past year. In contrast, there were main effects of sexual orientation, such that sexual minority youth were more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience any form of dating conflict (*OR* = 2.03, 95% CI [1.46, 2.83]), and specifically threatening behavior (*OR* = 2.54, 95% CI [1.79, 3.59]) and physical abuse (*OR* = 1.95, 95% CI [1.31, 2.85]). Moreover, girls were more likely to report threatening behavior than boys (*OR* = 1.45, 95% CI [1.11, 1.90]).

There were not significant interaction effects between gender and sexual orientation for dating conflict overall (*OR* = 0.99, 95% CI [0.46, 2.20]) or the following subscales: Threatening Behavior (*OR* = 1.33, 95% CI [0.58, 3.23]) and Physical Abuse (*OR* = 1.45, 95% CI [0.48, 4.04]). The interaction was significant for Sexual Abuse (*OR* = 0.36, 95% CI [0.15, 0.93]), such that heterosexual girls had greater odds of experiencing sexual abuse in a dating relationship than heterosexual boys (21% versus 7%; Table 1). In contrast, both

sexual minority girls (27%) and boys (23%) had similarly elevated rates of sexual abuse (Figure 1d). The simple slopes for sexual abuse were: −2.58 + 1.21x (males); −1.31 + 0.30x (females). The ICCs for dating conflict were 0.01 for Threatening Behavior and Sexual Abuse, and 0.05 for Physical Abuse in a dating relationship.

Boys (*OR* = 0.12, 95%CI [0.03, 0.38]) and girls (*OR* = 0.24, 95%CI [0.06, 0.76]) were less likely than transgender youth to experience any form of dating conflict. Regarding specific types of conflict, boys were less likely than transgender youth to experience sexual abuse (*OR* = 0.06, 95%CI [0.02, 0.17]) and threatening behavior within a dating relationship (*OR* = 0.27, 95%CI [0.09, 9.02]). Girls were also less likely than transgender youth to experience sexual abuse (*OR* = 0.17, 95%CI [0.05, 0.52]). There were no significant differences in odds of physical abuse (girl contrast: *OR* = 0.68, 95%CI [0.20, 3.15]; boy contrast: *OR* = 0.50, 95%CI [0.14, 3.20]. There are not accepted and published standards for power analyses for linear mixed models, particularly with binary outcomes. However, given the small number of transgender students, particularly when restricted to the students who reported a dating relationship in the last year, these analyses should be interpreted with particular caution. Regarding physical dating conflict, observed power is low, simply reflecting the non-significant observed differences for these gender identity contrasts. Nevertheless, given limited research in this area, these results might provide initial effect size estimates for future work.

Hypothesis 2: Overlap between Bias-Based and General Peer Victimization

Victimization was rarely experienced in isolation, supporting Hypothesis 2. One sexual minority boy, one sexual minority girl, and zero transgender students experienced only bias-based harassment without other forms of victimization. Among youth who endorsed bias-based harassment, 90% of transgender youth, 87% of sexual minority girls, and 74% of sexual minority boys experienced two or more additional types of victimization. For sexual minority boys, this victimization was most often in the form of bullying or sexual harassment (83%), although 60% also reported dating conflict and 18% reported sexual victimization. Similarly, for sexual minority girls, this victimization was most often in the form of bullying (89%) or sexual harassment (93%), with 55% also reporting dating conflict and 26% reporting sexual victimization. Among transgender youth who endorsed bias-based discrimination, all reported bullying as well, with 80% reporting some form of sexual harassment, 88% reporting dating conflict, and 50% reporting sexual victimization.

Hypothesis 3: Polyvictimization Rates

Compared to heterosexual youth, sexual minority youth experienced a greater number of types of victimization (B = 0.48, 95%CI [0.34, 0.61]). Girls experienced significantly more concurrent victimization than did boys (B = 0.48, 95%CI [0.40, 0.56]). Therefore, overall, sexual minority girls reported the greatest number of victimization types. Excluding bias-based verbal harassment, 91% of sexual minority girls experienced some form of peer victimization over the past year, compared to 79% of sexual minority boys, 78% of heterosexual girls, and 63% of heterosexual boys (see Table 2). The interaction between gender and sexual orientation was not significant (B = 0.08, 95%CI [−0.21, 0.37]). The ICC for cumulative victimization was 0.01.

Boys (B = −1.38, 95%CI [−1.89, −0.87]) and girls (B = −0.90, 95%CI [−1.41, −0.40]) experienced significantly less victimization than transgender youth. Eighty-six percent of transgender youth reported some form of peer victimization in the last year and 14% endorsed all four forms of peer victimization (i.e., bullying; sexual harassment; unwanted sexual intercourse; dating conflict).

Discussion

This research highlights that sexual minority youth, particularly girls, and transgender youth are at pronounced risk for experiencing nearly every specific type of victimization assessed (Hypothesis 1), that bias-based harassment rarely impacts these youth in isolation (Hypothesis 2), and that sexual minority and transgender youth face significantly more forms of peer victimization concurrently compared to heterosexual youth and nontransgender youth, respectively (Hypothesis 3).

Hypothesis 1: Individual Types of Peer Victimization

Hypothesis 1 was supported in that transgender and sexual minority youth reported greater peer victimization than nontransgender and heterosexual youth, respectively. Compared with heterosexual youth, sexual minority youth reported higher rates of every type of victimization assessed – bullying, sexual harassment, unwanted sexual contact and intercourse, and sexual abuse, physical abuse, and threatening behavior within a relationship.

Among sexual minority youth, there were some gender differences in risk. In some cases, particularly regarding victimization of a sexual nature (i.e., sexual harassment, sexual abuse within a dating relationship), sexual minority boys and girls evidenced similarly high rates of peer victimization. Thus, compared to heterosexual boys, who rarely experience these forms of victimization, sexual minority boys are at pronounced risk. However, in many cases, female sexual minority youth were more likely to be victimized compared to their heterosexual peers and sexual minority males due to their position as women and as sexual minorities, two groups that are more likely to be victimized overall. On every victimization outcome except physical abuse within a dating relationship, girls reported significantly greater levels of peer victimization than did boys. Therefore, in all but two cases where sexual minority boys evinced similar rates (sexual abuse within a dating relationship; sexual harassment by female peers), sexual minority girls demonstrated the highest rates of peer victimization. Further, interaction effects revealed that sexual minority girls evidenced particularly pronounced instances of bullying specifically.

Notably, sexual minority youth were more likely to experience sexual harassment than heterosexual youth. However, the interaction effects revealed that it was same-gender harassment that was driving these effects, such that sexual minority youth were more likely to be sexually harassed by members of their own gender than heterosexual same-gender youth were. It is possible these findings reflect unwanted advances from same-gender potential partners; however, it is also possible that heterosexual youth are the perpetrators. Some youth report that bullying is useful in teaching victims the boundaries of unacceptable behaviors for their group (Oliver, Hoover, & Hazler, 1994). For example, homophobic name-calling punishes youth who transgress the expectations of heterosexuality and the

gender binary, and utilize a variety of other tactics (e.g., physical contact, negative verbal comments about genitalia or physical features) to uphold and enforce traditional gender roles (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). Indeed, we found that sexual minority and transgender youth who experienced bias-based harassment almost universally experienced other types of sexual harassment. Therefore, sexual harassment may thus be used to "teach" same-gender peers the heteronormative, gendered expectations regarding sexuality for their peer group, and this might be used more frequently against sexual minority and transgender youth who are seen as violating these expectations. These findings are therefore consistent with recent calls to develop gender transformative prevention programming, which acknowledges and directly challenges the gendered power dynamics and gender role expectations that can impede open communication around sexual health as well as help-seeking among survivors of interpersonal violence (Miller, 2018). Such efforts are also consistent with our findings that, compared to nontransgender youth, transgender youth reported greater victimization for all outcomes except physical abuse within a dating relationship.

Hypothesis 2: Overlap between Bias-Based and General Peer Victimization

In support of Hypothesis 2, youth who reported bias-based harassment almost universally reported other peer victimization. Nearly half of sexual minority youth and of transgender youth experienced the form of bias-based verbal harassment assessed (i.e., being called gay or lesbian as an insult), which is concerning (a) given the limited nature of this assessment item, and that (b) bias-based victimization is associated with poorer mental health outcomes than general bullying (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). However, these findings also highlight that bias-based victimization is typically occurring with a wide swath of other victimization. Therefore, it is important to investigate how victimization more broadly compounds the effects of bias-based discrimination during a developmental period that is critical to youths' development of coping skills (Swearer Napolitano, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). Further, these findings extend other research on the co-occurrence of bias-based and general victimization among youth generally (Evans & Chapman, 2014), by highlighting the risk specific to sexual minority youth and transgender youth.

Hypothesis 3: Polyvictimization Rates

In support of the third hypothesis, sexual minority and transgender youth also reported greater rates of polyvictimization than heterosexual youth and boys and girls, respectively. The victimization of sexual minority girls was ubiquitous, with only 9% endorsing zero forms of non-bias-based victimization. Transgender youth had a markedly high risk of experiencing multiple forms of violence. In the past year, more than one-in-ten transgender students experienced every form of peer victimization assessed. The prevalence and range of victimization is even more staggering given that this study assessed only peer victimization. Given that sexual minority and transgender youth also experience victimization from within their own families and in the community at large (Sterzing et al., 2019), in addition to structural forms of stigma and discrimination, these rates are even more concerning.

Prevention, Clinical and Policy Implications

The high rates of polyvictimization among sexual minority and transgender youth have important policy and clinical implications. Due to the high risk of global victimization of

sexual minority and transgender youth, concerned adults (e.g., clinicians, parents, educators) should make sure to assess for multiple forms of victimization, particularly if they know that a youth is experiencing bias-based harassment. However, given the widespread victimization of these youth, schools may face barriers in engaging these youth in support services. For example, girls who report the most peer harassment are also more likely to perceive that their school tolerates this harassment (Ormerod, Collinsworth, & Perry, 2008). This might be compounded for sexual minority and transgender youth who are often experiencing both general and identity-specific victimization. It is therefore imperative that schools create and maintain safe, non-judgmental spaces to seek support, guidance, and help (e.g., Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2011).

Consistent with the limited research on sexual minority and transgender youth (Dank et al., 2014; Espelage et al., 2018; Martin-Storey, 2015), our results demonstrate that sexual minority and transgender youth display a markedly elevated risk of dating violence compared to their heterosexual and nontransgender peers, respectively. Future research should investigate the risk factors for and outcomes of dating conflict among adolescent samples. However, these high rates speak to the need for the development of dating prevention programming that is inclusive of these youth, as sexual minority and transgender youth might have less access to and support around their dating relationships (e.g., Mustanski, Birkett, Greene, Hatzenbuehler, & Newcomb, 2014) and only 5% of sexual minority and transgender youth report receiving inclusive coverage of LGBT-related topics in sexual education (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014).

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge several limitations to the present study. First, we only assessed peer victimization. Although this approach provided depth in the assessment of each type of peer victimization, these estimates likely underrepresent victimization experienced more broadly in students' communities. Therefore, this research should complement the only existing studies to assess polyvictimization among sexual and gender minority youth (Sterzing et al., 2019, 2017). Second, although the rate of transgender students was comparable to other research with youth (Perez-Brumer, Day, Russell, & Hatzenbuehler, 2017), estimates of gender-nonconforming youth are closer to 3% in studies that provide more response options (Rider, Mcmorris, Gower, Coleman, & Eisenberg, 2018). Our assessment of transgender identification also does not reflect the prevalence nor the experiences of gender-nonconforming individuals more broadly (e.g., genderqueer, non-binary). Further, the sample size of transgender students, particularly when limited to those who had been in a dating relationship, was small, and therefore may not generalize to transgender students more broadly. The absence of a significant difference in physical dating violence victimization based on gender identity, despite transgender students' higher rates than girls and boys, should be interpreted with particular caution given low power. Future research should explore these outcomes to determine if these differences would emerge as reliably significant and do so in national samples that are able to achieve larger sample sizes. Future research might also examine whether the gendered nature of some survey items (e.g., sexual harassment by a male or female peer) capture all experiences of current students, particularly given the nonresponse rates to items on sexual harassment

by same-gender peers. Fourth, we were prohibited from collecting race/ethnicity data in this sample. However, research suggests that the impact of victimization on mental health differs both as a function of race and sexual orientation (Drabble et al., 2018). Fifth, due to insufficient cell sizes to examine gender by sexual orientation contrasts, we were not able to examine specific sexual minority identities. Bisexual youth experience poorer mental health compared even to lesbian and gay youth (Feinstein & Dyar, 2017), and research should explore identity-specific differences. Sixth, this survey represents the experiences of 10th-grade students recruited from one region: the northeastern USA. Although recruitment from schools for a broad survey on health, without regard to sexual orientation or gender in recruitment materials or efforts, represents an advance over convenience-based methods used in prior polyvictimization research, this research might not generalize to other regions. Finally, we assessed only one form of bias-based victimization, which did not include gender identity-based harassment, and this likely underestimates the prevalence and scope of bias-based victimization these youth experience.

Research Implications

Victimization across contexts is normative for sexual minority and transgender youth. In addition to highlighting the importance of assessing victimization more broadly, these findings suggest that focusing solely on single types of victimization, and developing interventions to support youth around these individual types, will likely fail to meet the needs of sexual minority and transgender youth or ameliorate the detrimental impact of other forms of victimization. Future research on polyvictimization should increasingly examine the unique and shared risk factors across forms of victimization. For example, a prior history of victimization is a strong predictor of victimization, including sexual violence and dating violence. However, most of this research examines only the same type of victimization as a predictor of subsequent violence. It is possible that shared risk factors (e.g., assertiveness, a lack of social support) underlie multiple forms of harm, and future research should target shared proximal risk factors in prevention programming.

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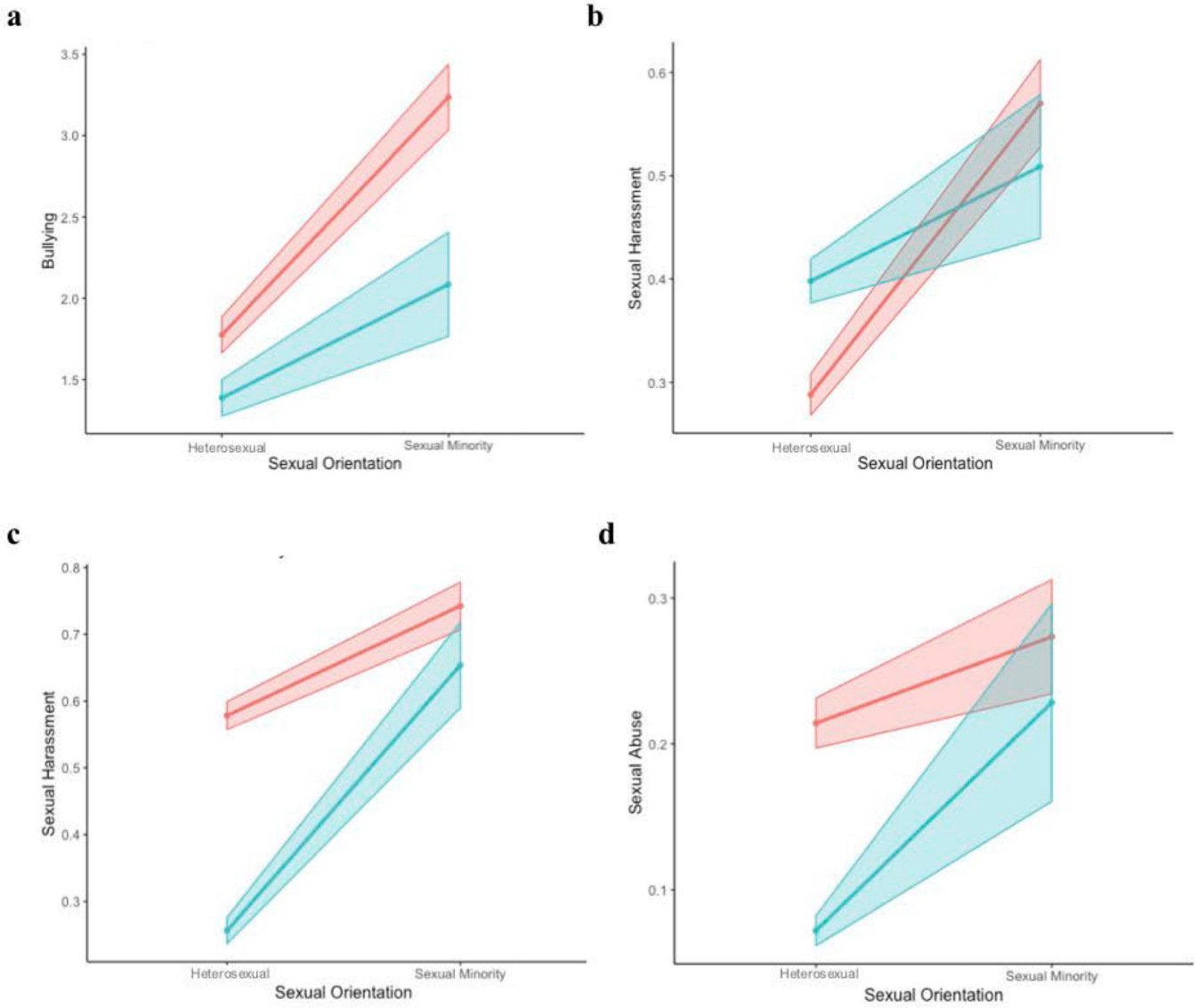

Figure 1.

Visualization of the interaction effect for gender (male: green; female: red) and sexual orientation (heterosexual, sexual minority) for (a) bullying, (b) sexual harassment by a female peer, (c) sexual harassment by a male peer, and (d) sexual abuse within a dating relationship. Shading represents 95% confidence intervals. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Table 1.

Prevalence rates (%, *n*) of victimization by sexual and gender identities

	Boys		Girls		Gender	
	H	SM	H	SM	Boy/Girl	Trans
Bullying	45% (520)	58% (38) *	61% (709)	78% (144) ***	55% (1482)	75% (15)
Bias-Based	16% (160)	40% (23) ***	10% (108)	40% (70) ***	15% (376)	53% (10) ***
Sexual Harassment						
Perpetrated by a boy	28% (223)	66% (39) ***	59% (660)	76% (133) ***	48% (1096)	75% (15) *
Perpetrated by a girl	40% (397)	51% (28)	29% (228)	57% (88) ***	36% (765)	67% (12) **
Any	42% (437)	66% (39) ***	61% (677)	76% (135) ***	53% (1335)	76% (16) *
Sexual Victimization						
Unwanted touching	4% (38)	6% (4)	8% (87)	17% (31) ***	6% (163)	33% (7) ***
Unwanted intercourse	3% (31)	3% (2)	4% (47)	9% (17) **	4% (100)	19% (4) *
Dating Conflict[a]						
Threats	14% (101)	26% (10)	19% (137)	38% (53) ***	19% (311)	39% (5)
Physical	13% (93)	18% (7)	15% (111)	27% (38) ***	15% (258)	23% (3)
Sexual	7% (51)	23% (9) ***	21% (157)	27% (38)	16% (262)	62% (8) ***
Any	22% (155)	36% (14) *	34% (251)	51% (71) ***	30% (508)	69% (9) **

Note.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

[a] Limited to individuals reporting a dating relationship in the past year. H = heterosexual. SM = sexual minority. Trans = transgender.

Table 2.

Prevalence rates (%, *n*) of cumulative victimization, including bullying, sexual harassment, dating violence, and unwanted sexual intercourse.

	None	1	2	3	4
Sexual Identity					
Boys ** Heterosexual *n* = 1153	37% (427)	35% (403)	21% (243)	6% (71)	1% (9)
Sexual Minority *n* = 66	21% (14)	36% (24)	24% (16)	17% (11)	2% (1)
Girls *** Heterosexual *n* = 1158	22% (253)	30% (345)	32% (371)	15% (172)	2% (17)
Sexual Minority *n* = 185	9% (16)	22% (41)	39% (72)	25% (47)	5% (9)
Gender Identity					
Boys *n* = 1269 ***a	36% (455)	35% (443)	22% (275)	7% (85)	1% (11)
Girls *n* = 1413 **b	21% (293)	29% (409)	33% (459)	16% (226)	2% (26)
Transgender *n* = 21	14% (3)	10% (2)	43% (9)	19% (4)	14% (3)

Note.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

[a] Significance (chi-square) of contrast between transgender and boy-identified students.

[b] Significance of the contrast between transgender and girl-identified students.