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What street harassment means

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What Street Harassment Means

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

By Madison Davis

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Sociology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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Introduction

“Even if I knew the context, I would still think that the woman screaming at the guy walking away is crazy”

This quote was given by one of the women I interviewed when we were talking about some of the ways she would like to respond to street harassment. She said she was angry, frustrated, and demoralized; but, what would yelling accomplish? She felt that the impact on the man would be negligible, at best, or impetus for escalation, at worst. And, she felt that others would be likely to judge her. This sense of helplessness and frustration in the face of a perceived double-bind (Frye 1983), in which there is seemingly no “good” option for response or retribution, was shared by many of the women with whom I spoke about street harassment. Many of reported that it would be amazing to have something to do, if only there was an older woman or a class that could give them answers. Instead, their reactions were largely to seethe in silence, and that silence permeates into how they talk about navigating the social world amidst the slow buildup of gendered violence they have experienced across their lives.

The idea for this research began after walking to my own campus without a set of headphones during my junior year as an undergraduate, and noticing just how many men yelled at me, honked, or gestured to me – in other words, harassed me – in a given week. I passed a “Do Not Enter” sign that had the word slut spray painted on it with a smiley face, walked with a set of keys between my knuckles, and in my head I thought about the movie, *Taken*, where the daughter has to recite as many details about her abductor as she can. Street harassment was a concept I thought easy to master, and I wanted to think of things that could be done. We have legal protections for women against harassment in the workplace and in schools, but we have yet

to figure out what to do when it comes to protecting women on the street. I looked into initiatives like *Hollaback* and *StopStreetHarassment* which document women's experiences and advocate for safe space and legislation. When I read stories for Hollaback in 2015, many were dated back to 2008, and when I looked into Twitter hashtags these were also dated. Street harassment seemingly had a moment in which it took up a small portion of dominant cultural focus, and yet even in that moment the conversation and analysis focused on documenting instances of harassment, and not critiquing the underlying culture that enables such patterns of systematic male violence. The ability of online naming and enumeration of experiences of street harassment to promote justice is questionable (see Fileborn 2014, 2016). That moment has passed, but the realities of street harassment have not. I decided to reach out to women to talk with them about their experiences of harassment and how they made sense of them. As our conversations unfolded, it was clear that my participants were frustrated by and resigned to the ongoing reality of harassment, that their experiences of street harassment were not confined to the "street" but existed across a range of public contexts, and that the harassment they experienced did not exist in a vacuum but was part of a broader mosaic of experiences of gendered violence at the hands of men.

Literature Review

Street Harassment disproportionately affects women. In many respects, it is a normative experience of public life for women, not only experienced subjectively but reflected in mainstream cultural stereotypes in the form of the male construction worker yelling out at the woman walking by. For women in the United States, eighty-five percent have experienced street harassment before the age of seventeen and sixty-seven percent before age fourteen (Livingston, 2015). Within the year of the Cornell study in conjunction with the grassroots anti-harassment

organization, *Hollaback*, in 2015, fifty percent of the respondents under forty had been groped or fondled, seventy-seven percent had been followed by a man or group of men, and over half had changed their way of being (clothing, social events, transportation) as a result of street harassment (Livingston, 2015). Street harassment, unlike many others forms of male violence against women, is most often perpetrated by strangers, and it can be understood as an extension and expression of male dominance in social life. Indeed, as Deidre Davis (1994) has argued, it is apt to understand street harassment as a form of *sexual terrorism*; she notes that street harassment “plays a definite role in the objective condition of women fearing bodily harm on a day to day basis” (141). Street harassment dehumanizes women through the vehicle of sexual objectification, and it functions as a performative means for men to bond with other men, simultaneously signifying and solidifying an identity as men and expressing male dominance at the expense of women (Bernard and Schlaffer, 1984; Marcelle, 2016).

Although the participants in the current study were majority white, heterosexual, cis women, it is crucial to understand street harassment through an intersectional lens. As Davis (1994) puts it:

All women are subjected to street harassment and, consequently, street harassment is a form of gender subordination. However, when [women of color] are subjected to street harassment, street harassment is, at the very least, genderized and racialized (149).

Or, in the words of Hawley G. Fogg-Davis (2006), street harassment “indicates a sexual imbalance of power that is connected to broader systems of patriarchy, racism, and homophobia” (74). Specifically for African-American women, Davis (1994) points out that street harassment “evokes the institutional memory of slavery” and the historical and public denial of the moral

and corporal autonomy of women of the African diaspora in the Americas (163). Acts of street harassment, in other words, never occur in a vacuum. Instead, they occur in an intersecting framework of patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. Finally, although experiences of street harassment as an enactment of sexual terrorism are nearly ubiquitous for women, harassment is under-researched and under-theorized compared to other manifestations of sexual terrorism and male violence against women (see Logan, 2015).

Methods

This project is based on nine semi-structured interviews with college-aged women in their last year of education at a public university. I chose college-aged women for convenience but also because men often participate in street harassment as a means to convey power and bond with other men (Bernard and Schaffler, 1984), so college provides a ripe environment for men in groups trying to enact an identity. This was an opt-in study, responses were collected from a bulk email request for participation, and interviews were scheduled. As noted, interviews were semi-structured, and they were meant to be an hour long (interviews regularly went overtime by about a half hour due to interest in sharing). My participants were majority white, heterosexual, cis women. Out of the nine women interviewed, five disclosed an experience of a sexual assault or rape beyond their experiences of street harassment. Although I do not go into all of these accounts in detail in the pages that follow, it is important for grounding my research and contextualizing street harassment within a larger system of gender violence.

I approached this study from a feminist (Kleinman 2007) and symbolic interactionist (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934) perspective. Symbolic interactionists posit that people are social agents interacting within specific socio-historic and political contexts based on the meanings that

social objects hold for them. Although context provides shape for human interaction, social agents act back on those contexts. In this sense, we are both shapers and shaped as social agents. As a feminist, I start from the premise that sex inequality is real and pervasive and that it provides important aspects of the context in which social interaction takes place. From this perspective, this study is meant to understand the effects and impact street harassment has on women in college. By conducting one on one interviews, it uncovers the processes of meaning making in which women engage surrounding street harassment: how do women make sense of, navigate, and respond to street harassment within their daily existence? It's important to note that this research does not intend to change women's behavior in regards to their responses to street harassment as the threat of danger in these situations is pervasive and women should respond in ways that are comfortable and safe for them.

Results

As noted, street harassment is a normative experience for women living in patriarchal cultures. My participants were no exception to this general pattern. Although they self-selected into the study based on their experiences with street harassment, their experiences match the patterns elucidated in survey research on women in the broader U.S. population. Importantly, for my participants, and for women more broadly, street harassment is not an isolated incident on which they could reflect, but an intrusive experience that they faced regularly as they navigated public life. Although the aim of this study is exploratory, and although the women often made comments such as "I've never told anyone this but..." or "I don't know how we got onto this topic," some patterns across their narratives were clear: (1) the women's narratives concerning harassment changed over time as they aged from their teens into college; (2) harassment is not

confined to the street, but experienced across public life; and, (3) women often carry the weight of harassment in silence. In the pages that follow I describe these themes in greater detail.

Changing Narrative

When the question “what does street harassment entail to you” is first posed to participants, each viewed the situation relatively the same:

“Mostly cat-calling, whistling, yelling, or honking.”

“To me street harassment kind of just sounds like someone yelling when you’re walking down the street – someone who is like sitting or walking nearby kind of like bothers you or says something inappropriate basically.”

“You’re on the street just walking and someone comes up to you saying something that makes you uncomfortable.”

Participants were young, between 10 and 14, when men first began targeting them with harassment. Many noted this was initially experienced as a positive because it validated their self-conception of being a woman, and an attractive woman at that. They noted that having men comment on their person granted a sense of security that they were doing something right. It was an achievement that they were succeeding at being someone. Insecurity was a common aspect of the women’s narratives in relation to how they framed their understanding of these experiences, specifically as it related to the women’s comfort with and within their bodies. In my participants’ accounts, the emphasis on women’s value as a function of their physical attractiveness and “sex appeal” within a “cult of thinness” (see Hesse-Biber et al., 2006), particularly for young women and girls, made the salience of their early experiences of men’s harassment all the more potent:

“Your body is your body and you’re changing but you feel uncomfortable and embarrassed and there’s no one you want to talk to so it was more like everything happening at once plus that pressure ... like, that while I wanted to be able to wear make up the right way and to be able to dress nice and I wanted to feel beautiful but that’s hard ... so, when somebody older especially does pay attention to you is like, wow, okay, they like that, I’m going to keep doing what I’m doing—it’s okay that they stare at my butt because that means it’s good.”

“When I was younger I was a little bit more... I was chunkier... I did not have guy friends and I did not interact with guys, so I reacted in a way that would not deter [male harassers’] attention away from me.”

In this way, harassing behavior from men functioned somewhat like a rite of passage into womanhood and as a gendering experience that reaffirmed women’s subordinated status and value through the male gaze.

In the women’s accounts, as they got older and experienced more harassment from men, the meaning of the experiences slightly evolved. Often, their understanding of harassment shifted from marking something like a personal achievement to viewing it as a misconstrued compliment, and as an increasingly unpleasant experience. This particular shift, in the context of a cultural norm that women should be modest (see Smith and Huntoon, 2013), led many of the participants to keep their stories to themselves as they feared that talking to other women about how frequent harassing behavior was or discussing the content of harassing comments would be viewed as gloating. As one participant claimed after being harassed and talking to a friend, “You don’t want to appear that you’re hot shit or anything like that—you want to push it out of your

head so in the moment I joke and laugh to play it off, but once that moment's gone—it hits me that I'm embarrassed, anxious, and don't feel good.” Increasingly, the women reported, the sense of threat and vulnerability in the midst of harassment was present and lingering, compounded by their sense that they shouldn't or couldn't talk about it, a point I will come back to below.

As the interviews progressed, the women reflected experiences that they couldn't necessarily place into a frame of street harassment, but which were important in telling their story of making sense of it. Many participants, for example, talked about how they were verbally harassed in the hallways of their high schools, had nonconsensual first kisses, were groped by their lockers, and even stalked by their peers for two to three months. When they turned to adults in their lives in an attempt to make sense of these experiences or find resources to deal with them, responses were often dismissive, minimizing, or victim-blaming—“he just likes you,” “feel flattered,” “this is why I hate my daughters growing up.” One respondent noted that a teacher instructed her to encourage the male advances, and another reported that her father told her, “say thank you—they are telling you that you're attractive.” Such responses, which can be read as a form of gas-lighting (Abramson 2014), encouraged the women to turn their attention to male feelings before their own and cast self-doubt into their experiences. This self-doubt and confusion could last into college. One participant, an active runner, pondered:

Maybe some guys think that if they cat-call a girl while she's exercising that she'll keep exercising? ... Maybe I'm reading their intentions completely wrong, and they're like, “Wow, good for you for exercising,” by honking my horn at you.

Such doubt could enhance the women's sense of isolation.

In addition to the explicit comments from significant adults in the women's lives, dominant perceptions about gender also shaped the meanings they tied to harassment. In our interviews, many of the women discussed heterosexual dating rituals and expressed the idea that women should be polite to male advances because it's hard for men to share their feelings. As one participant put it: "The girl has to give the guy a chance—I'm not allowed to say no to the guy cause I don't know what's wrong with them or I don't understand them." In the face of such powerful cultural scripts, and reflecting the pervading culture of politeness for women (see Olsen 2016), many of the respondents reported feeling pressure to smile, or even to say thank you, in the face of harassment. In the women's accounts, they often stayed quiet because maybe it wasn't what they thought it was—maybe the men did it as a prank or maybe they had good intentions, and if the women say something then maybe the women are in the wrong.

When the women discussed their most recent experiences with harassment, usually only a couple of days previous to our conversation, their reactions center primarily on feeling frustrated and angry, although they often reported feelings of lingering self-doubt. Participants struggled with what it meant to be alone, first being exasperated that they really cannot go anywhere without being called out, and the others wondering if it is about being alone that provides an invitation to harassment.

"Can't you just leave me alone? Like – I don't even know you – why are you doing this? But also sometimes it makes me afraid, you know? So, I'm getting into my car like for all I know those guys might try to follow me home in their car. Or it was dark, they could have parked their car and waited for me to get closer. That was more of an unsettling feeling than anything, you know. And it's just - kind of disgusting – I feel – I think

maybe these guys feel like they're making us feel better about ourselves and it's the opposite – I feel so much more worthless when I'm treated that way”

“Did you pick me because I was a girl alone or are you just drunk and I was a person?”

They report feeling angry that they did not feel entitled to do things on their own, but it's also a decision about feeling safe.

“I don't like being alone – if I don't have to be alone, I won't be. I like company – it's comforting. Being alone, I get nervous and anxious, and it's just terrible”

“When I'm alone I'm a little bit more cautious –I'm uncomfortable and I feel like I need to go somewhere else. But when I'm out with my friends, whether girls or guys – I think it's a little bit more relaxed – especially since I think someone is less likely to do something like that to someone either in a group or to an entire group. I would say that I would still notice if something happened, but it wouldn't be as worrisome, I guess, as it would be if I was by myself”

Fear creates a necessity for women to want to surround themselves, and often creating a dependency on needing others to help take care of them. They need someone to take them to the grocery store so they aren't followed down the aisles, or some women need someone to walk them to a public bathroom. Even though these women are also sharing stories of harassment in groups, there's a sense of safety that the harasser can't get everyone. It can be paralyzing if women don't have social support, and the worst part is that it's so normal that no one is talking to each other about why they need you to walk with them to their car or apartment.

Street Harassment as Public Harassment

As noted in the previous section, the women's experiences of male violence were not confined to the street. Any space where women were unable to control who would be present became a space that had to be negotiated, and often men were claiming power in these public arenas. Interviewees noted that experiences often moved beyond comments, catcalls, and yelling and into physical harm. As one woman recounted:

Last year in like January or February, I went to a party in the same apartment complex that I live in, not even 5 minutes away. And I went with a friend of mine because she had a tendency to go a little bit harder at parties, and I wanted to make sure she was ok, and I didn't really know anyone else at the party, but I wasn't really planning on getting drunk or anything. one of the guys was kind of – I had a serious boyfriend at the time, and still do, so I wasn't really looking for anything. But we were dancing a little at the party – which is what you do at parties and not really a big deal. But I distinctly remember him leaning over a little and whispering in my ear “Let's go outside where no one else can see.” And I said no, and I just kind of . . . my friend was kind of talking with someone else, and I knew she'd be safe, so I just decided to leave. So, I walked outside and I went and sat on like a hill and was on my phone, like, Oh my God I can't believe that just happened, and just kind of like cooling off a little bit before I went into my apartment like – seething – especially because all my roommates were asleep and I didn't want to like – wake them up by slamming the door – that sort of thing. So, he comes up to me and sits a good 2-feet away from me, and I'm kind of ignoring him. And he says, “I'm sorry about that.” And I say, you know, “It's fine.” And then as I put my phone away, he kind of like – I don't want to say “lunged” because that's a bit more violent and aggressive than it was, but he kind of um – moved so that he was straddling me – and I'm lying on

the ground with like sticks and leaves under me – and it’s January, so it’s not like it was warm outside – and he’s like trying to take off my leggings.

Thankfully, this participant did manage to get out of this situation without the violence escalating any further. However, such experiences can cloud our perception of what “street harassment” is. Making real the threat that is often implied by the seemingly benign comments on the street, this instance started with unsolicited sexual comments from a stranger and ended with a physical assault. This highlights the need to broaden our discussion beyond *street* harassment to focus, instead, on public harassment. Furthermore, this touches on the spaces women occupy. This situation was just outside of my participant’s home. Another participant recounted an experience where men lived on the bottom floor of her apartment complex and they regularly took up space on the stairwell, forcing contact between the participant and the harassers. Another recounted how shopping at the grocery store created unease as a man stared her down. Still struggling with self-doubt and a degree of internalized responsibility, she reflected, “It’s not his fault but I did not feel safe anymore, so I had to leave.”

Because harassment is one component of a broader pattern of male violence against women, the harassment my participants experienced was not confined to the street. The women reported that they wished they knew what to do about harassment as it was a pervasive element in their daily routines and in their experience of public life. They often experienced a disconnect as fear became a regular and normative aspect of their experiences—two participants reported seeking anxiety attack remedies and another reported studying intense martial arts and self-defense training. As noted previously, participants also reported making arrangements to mitigate instances where they would be alone—taking a person with them running, another to go

to the grocery store, another to eat out with. The threat and reality of male violence in public spaces put them in a dependent situation while also trying to be independent, capable women.

Silence and Isolation

In the context of internalized self-blame and cultural pressures on women to be modest and polite, the women in this study often carried the weight of their fear and frustration in relative silence. In interviews, they discussed mostly bringing up the topic of harassment with female friends in the context of exasperated jokes: “You won’t believe what just happened to me—I was at the grocery store in sweats and a guy catcalled me.” Expressing sympathy, their friends would “usually say that’s so gross or men are stupid.” The women reported that their friends made similar joking comments with them, and even noted that they are sometimes harassed with their friends:

When my friend and I are walking down the streets and we get catcalled we’re just, like, “That was awkward,” and we continue. I never think to bring this up with other women because I’m just like I’m sure it happens to them all the time, what’s the point? They know what it’s like.

The women, thus, understood that the threat and/or reality of male violence is something that all women experience, and yet their discussions with other women, if they happened at all, mostly did not rise above the level of exasperated venting, an expression of frustration at men behaving badly. And, yet, in the interviews, it appeared clear that the women both needed and wanted to talk more in depth about these realities. When our conversations began, many seemed to feel that it would be the same type of conversation they might have with friends as they were nonchalant and put on fake voices to imitate men who call out a “hey, baby.” It was humorous and did

function to “let off steam,” but when I asked the women about how it felt to them to experience harassment, and how the threat and reality of harassment colored their experience of public life, the mood shifted. The women reported thinking that they’re taking the weight of it too personally, that they are the only ones who feel this way, that they are just “particularly anxious”, “more self-conscious than most”, or “tend to overthink these things.” Even talking about instances of physical violence, participants often considered themselves lucky that it wasn’t “worse.” Two participants experienced a similar scenario of a male stranger at a frat party putting his hands down their pants as they said no and pushed the man off multiple times; but, each of these women “knocked on wood” that they’ve never experienced physical harm from a man on the street. Across the interviews, there was a clear sense of resignation to the reality of male violence, a sense that it was just normal, a given, a reality that could not be changed. . This is not to say that women were not angry about their experiences because each stated that they wished they could scream at the guy or tell them off, but the fear of “what-if” becomes more pronounced in that context: What if the men circled back in their car, what if this man had mental distress, what if the women were yelled at even more, what if they were beaten up, what if they brought it upon themselves somehow, what if it turned into something more? These women wanted answers. They wanted to feel safe. They asked for classes on self-defense or just an answer on what could end it. But as one participant put it, she mostly felt “exasperation--just wishing it would stop, thinking please stop, I don’t want to talk to you. But I also have in my mind that if I said something I would be an entitled bitch”. She talked about the entitlement men perceive they have to comment on women’s bodies, but when making a claim against street harassment she was aware that others may see her as the entitled one for asking for space and freedom to exercise, or grocery shop, or dance, or eat alone, or take the stairs up to her

apartment. When it comes to daily public harassment, often women are targeted being alone and that isolation clearly carries over to being unable to reach out to one another. Every interview went over time because, in the women's accounts, it was cathartic to have the space to make sense of their experiences.

Conclusion

Harassment works as an everyday reminder that women are not in control of what goes on in their lives. When we live in a society that puts men in positions of power, men's experiences as what's normal, and men's stories as the focus of attention (Johnson, 1997), then it's easy to see how women's experiences are lost. Men take up authority in public arenas, women try to understand why men are harassing them rather than look to each other for support, and the male understanding of harassment as a compliment or a means of flirting remains the dominant interpretation of this behavior/practice. Consequently, we don't see the toll this takes on women's daily lives, where fear drives their experiences. It's not just the singular fear of being harassed, but the fear that something worse—like a rape or assault—could occur. For half of my participants, this is what happened. Not only that, but their feelings, reactions, and responses are not considered even if shared. To other women sharing an experience of street harassment comes across as gloating whereas men believe that women are impolite for not acknowledging the compliment they've been given. Women take on harassment as a normal experience and assume every other woman understands the experience as they do. Even writing this piece, I had to step back from thinking that my results were simply a given or an obvious conclusion. This research is exploratory; much more can and should be said about how street harassment operates as one means by which men exercise violence against women. Street

harassment an initial step for most men to get comfortable with the idea, and it's women's first experiences in being victimized. But if we are looking to dismantle a culture that discourages women's voices as they speak to their experiences then we have to start by helping women speak up about how it felt. To create a space for open discussion because when we add up how much "street" is incorporated into women's experiences of harassment, and costs to women's lives are surrounding it, there has to be an open dialogue.

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