

Street Harassment: Current and Promising Avenues for Researchers and Activists

Dr. Laura S. Logan*
Sociology, Hastings College

Abstract

Research about street harassment indicates that the problem is far reaching in its effects and that most women and girls experience sexual harassment from men they do not know in public spaces. In recent years, an increasing number of activists, bloggers, and online media outlets have published pieces about street harassment, reflecting a growing and international anti-street harassment social movement. In this article, I discuss what scholars and activists tell us about street harassment, including prevalence, victims, harassers, responses and consequences, and theoretical explanations. I conclude with suggestions for further research, a call for more attention to the influence of overlapping inequalities, and an appeal to researchers to further explore this serious social problem.

Introduction

I was aerobic-walking near a mall, for exercise. It wasn't very late, just past dusk. It was summertime. It was nice out. As I went by one of the stores, a man standing outside said hello to me, and just to be polite, I smiled and said hello back. Then he started to follow me, keep talking to me. I was only a few blocks away from home, so I started to run. The man started to run too, and he caught me and raped me. At gunpoint. They never caught him (Gardner 1995, 2).

Three men were standing drinking outside the Jobcentre in Archway. As I went past them one touched my back and said "alright darling." I looked back at him, and then he and his two friends started to call me a bitch, a slag and a cunt. Then one shouted "I'll smash your back doors in." I then walked back and went into the Jobcentre and said to the security man who was in the lobby and who had witnessed it that they should not be allowed to stand there drinking and shouting verbal abuse. He said despite them being right in the doorway they were on public property and he couldn't do anything. I then had to walk back past them and hear more abuse. This was at about 10:30am (Stephanie, Hollaback! London).

In 2003 in Newark, New Jersey, Sakia Gunn, a 15 year old African American lesbian, was murdered when two men sexually harassed Sakia and her friends on the street. Although the girls rebuffed the men and announced that they were lesbians and uninterested, the men persisted. Within minutes, one of the men fatally stabbed Sakia in the chest.

Not a single day goes by that I am not leered at, growled at, spit on, stalked or called a "fuhus" (prostitute). A couple of months ago, I was assaulted by a group of teenage boys 20 feet from my front door. Though I've never been raped, I am violated every day by strangers on the street. And I am merely one of millions of women who endure sexual harassment and assault in public spaces from Cairo to Istanbul to New York (Alyson Neel 2013).

These are examples of street harassment and the kinds of incidents that help fuel women's fear of violence, particularly stranger violence. Yet public and scholarly conversations seldom cite

street harassment as a serious – and sometimes lethal – social problem. Feminist activists in the United States addressed street harassment, often indirectly, in the 1960s and 1970s; however, over time, concerns about workplace sexual harassment and the grave problems of sexual assault and domestic violence overshadowed the issue, placing street harassment on the periphery of the feminist movement. As di Leonardo noted in 1981, “In the wake of our repeated discoveries of the extent and damage to women of rape, battery, child abuse, and harassment in the workplace, protesting street harassment is sometimes seen as trivial” (51). Indeed, when street harassment is discussed, it is often incidental to another topic, and the scale of the problem minimized.

However, researchers should focus on street harassment for several reasons. We should be inspired by the growing international social movement to end, resist, prevent, or otherwise address street harassment more effectively. We should take aim at street harassment because it is on a continuum of violence against and oppression of femininities and the people associated with femininities. It is also on a continuum of violence against people of color, particularly when we consider institutional racism and the risks of criminalization associated with being in public space if one is, for instance, a Black man or woman. Street harassment is part of a larger culture that values in deed if not always in word men’s sexually predatory behaviors, sexual assault against women and children, women’s subordination and marginalization in politics, the second shift and the wage gap, victim blaming, the murder of transgender women, bashing gay men, repelling girls from math and science before they even get to high school, increasingly limited access to reproductive health care, racial profiling, and more. Research indicates that street harassment limits women’s presence in public space – where the work of politics and social change is most likely to take place – and that women think about harassment, fear it, and plan for it, *even in its absence* (Gardner 1995). Street harassment is more than a nuisance, more than a threat, more even than the violence that sometimes accompanies it.

In some terrifying cases, street harassment has been a precursor to violent physical or sexual victimization, including murder. Street harassment has been linked to the criminalization of women of color (e.g. Logan 2009; Richie 2012). Girls as young as those in elementary school have been victims of street harassment, resulting in negative perceptions about school or poor school attendance (Smith, Van Deven, and Huppuch 2011). Although Gardner (1995) conducted an important and valuable sociological study on street harassment in the mid-1990s, it is time to revisit the subject in more depth and from more angles. Gardner (1995) did not adequately or in some cases at all research street harassment’s relationships to racism, sexual assault, fear of rape, murder of transgender individuals, institutional sexism or heterosexism, masculine privilege, public health, girls’ educational performance, legal and policy implications, and any number of issues that activists are now addressing. The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women recognizes the importance of research, noting that local communities need data and evidence (United Nations Commission on the Status of Women: Report on the Fifty-seventh Session). In this paper, I review the literature on street harassment from multiple disciplines and from activists in the field and identify major findings and themes to provide a roadmap for future research.

Street harassment: terms and definitions

At first glance, there is a dearth of literature about street harassment, but the scarcity is a bit of a mirage, related in part to terminology. There are only a few empirical studies exclusively focused on street harassment, but scholars, practitioners, and activists have certainly written about street harassment. Studies on other topics have touched on street harassment as well. The term “street harassment” has not been universally deployed by scholars, journalist, or activists, though it has gained traction in recent years. Anti-street harassment social movements groups and some

scholars are using the expression, which suggests “street harassment” is now the most common and visible term for this social phenomenon (e.g. Heben 1994; Kearl 2010). Although di Leonardo (1981) used the phrase in 1981 – apparently the first scholar to do so – others who have written about or studied street harassment over the years have used a variety of terms: “everyday sexism,” “sexual terrorism,” “public harassment,” “stranger harassment,” “uncivil attention,” “sexual violence,” “offensive public speech,” “catcalls,” and more. Multiple ways of naming street harassment have hampered awareness of a cohesive body of literature about the subject. There is relatively little difference in how these terms are or have been used, with few exceptions. The term “sexual harassment” most often refers to sexual harassment in the workplace. The terms “sexual terrorism” and “everyday sexism” have been used to describe a range of sexual harassment and abuse, including micro-aggressions, molestation, rape, and street harassment. Stranger harassment is not commonly used to name street harassment, though research indicates that most incidents of street harassment are in fact perpetrated by strangers (e.g. Gardner 1995). Catcalls and offensive public speech are not particularly good terms for street harassment because street harassment includes a range of non-verbal behaviors, including stalking, making noises and gestures, and public exposure. Public harassment – although an apt term because “street harassment” occurs in public spaces, though not necessarily on or near streets – is not the currently favored term. In deference to the women and men who are actively working to end or resist street harassment, I follow their lead and use the term *street harassment*.

A closer look at the literature finds that the phenomenon of street harassment is mentioned, discussed, or alluded to in a range of scholarly work about other topics, often unmentioned in abstracts, indices, or titles, thus easy to overlook. For instance, articles and books about fear of crime, sexual harassment in the workplace, sexual assault and rape, public transportation, hate crime, urban living and city planning, discrimination against members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities, public space, street vendors, and women’s shopping have addressed street harassment. Scholars from multiple disciplines, such as sociology, women’s studies, urban studies, communications, geography, political science, criminology, ethnic studies, and history, have focused on street harassment in several countries, including the United States, Canada, Finland, the United Kingdom, and Italy.

Scholars, activists, and lawmakers have used multiple definitions of street harassment, definitions that vary along dimensions of behavior, victims, and offenders. Most definitions explicitly mention that street harassment is delivered in public by men and directed at women (e.g. Bowman 1993; di Leonardo 1981; MacMillan et al. 2000). Laws that directly address street harassment are uncommon. Instead, existing laws are expected to address some of the most egregious elements of street harassment, such as stalking and indecent exposure (for a more comprehensive look at street harassment from a legal standpoint, see Nielsen 2009). Some early definitions are narrower, suggesting for instance that only some women are targeted, such as this definition: “Street harassment occurs when one or more strange men accost one or more women whom they perceive as heterosexual in a public place which is not the woman’s/women’s worksite” (di Leonardo 1981, 51–52). Bowman defined street harassment as the sexual harassment “of women in public places by men who are strangers” (1993, 519). But studies demonstrate that women who are not perceived to be heterosexual are in fact targeted as well and that those whose gender identity is ambiguous or who do not adhere to the norms of the gender binary are also vulnerable to harassment, as are men in some instances (e.g. Namaste 1996). Reflecting this diversity among victims, several others have defined street harassment broadly as “unwanted sexual attention from strangers in public” (Wesselmann and Kelly 2010, 451; see also Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Gardner 1995; Kearl 2010; Lenton et al. 1999). Although street harassment is often sexual and women are most often the targets and men the offenders, that definition is also too narrow.

The definition of street harassment needs to make room for harassment that targets all groups, placing the onus on scholars and activists to distinguish the targets of the harassment they reference and the related epistemological nuances and significance. Some street harassers are motivated to target victims because of their race, sexual orientation, age, size, ability, language, citizenship, religion, or ethnicity, and often street harassment appears to be related to a combination of factors (e.g. Bowman 1993; Chen 1997; Davis 1994; Steinbugler 2005). A definition of street harassment, therefore, should be expansive enough to include harassment directed at women as well as others who experience street harassment. Gardner's (1995) definition seems particularly well suited to that task; she defines street harassment as

that group of abuses, harrings, and annoyances characteristic of public places and uniquely facilitated by communication in public. [Street] harassment includes pinching, slapping, hitting, shouted remarks, vulgarity, insults, sly innuendo, ogling, and stalking. [It] is on a continuum of possible events, beginning when customary civility among strangers is abrogated and ending with the transition to violent crime: assault, rape, or murder. (4)

When the definition of street harassment makes room for scholars and activists to consider the experiences of all who are targeted, analysis can reveal the similarities across groups as well as the factors that appear to be limited only to some. In addition, using a definition that allows for a broad range of targets but that specifies – as Gardner's definition does – the characteristics of street harassment require that researchers and activists do the work of explicating how gender (and race, class, sexuality, etc.), as a social and structural force, is implicated. This goes well beyond merely noting that most victims are women and girls. In general and with only a few exceptions, street harassment has not received adequate or purposeful attention from scholars; some researchers examine “harassment” or a related topic more broadly and short-change our understanding of street harassment, and the lack of one commonly used term has hampered our ability to see and engage with an existing unified body of research.

Street harassment as a social problem

Sociologists have long argued that when an issue is recognized as “bad or undesirable by a significant number of people or a number of significant people who mobilize to eliminate it,” it becomes a social problem (Heiner 2012, 5). In recent years, attention to street harassment, particularly from activists, has risen dramatically, building on the efforts of earlier feminists to Take Back The Night and transform rape culture. One of these efforts was the formation, in 2005, of Hollaback!. Hollaback! is an online network of groups across the globe that operate together as a social movement. Hollaback! uses the power of the Internet not only to connect activists and those who resist street harassment to each other but also to publicly display street harassment news, stories, and in some cases even photos and videos of the location or offender/s in a specific act of street harassment. Co-founder and executive director of Hollaback!, Emily May, is widely recognized as an international leader in the anti-street harassment movement. Recently, the New York City chapter of Hollaback! received a grant to “develop a method of providing geotagged street harassment data directly to city government” (O'Donovan 2013).

The Internet and other technologies now play a central role in the battle against street harassment. For instance, Cable News Network reports that “in Egypt, where verbal harassment, groping, stalking and indecent exposure are a common problem for women, an innovative tool...called HarassMap...uses online and offline technology to invite women to speak out and also mobilize communities to stand up to harassers” (Lee and Kermeliotis 2012). Another

leading organization in the anti-street harassment movement is Stop Street Harassment. Stop Street Harassment is a non-profit organization devoted to documenting and ending street harassment worldwide; it was established in 2012 after a 4-year stint as a website operated by prominent anti-street harassment activist Holly Kearl. Kearl recently conducted the first random-sample national street harassment survey. Kearl launched the first Anti-Street Harassment Day on March 20, 2011.

That same year, women in Toronto organized a “SlutWalk” to protest a police officer’s public assertion that women should not “dress like sluts” if they wanted to avoid sexual assault – “advice” given to women who are victims of street harassment as well. SlutWalks became a rapidly growing grassroots movement, with SlutWalk events in 2012 in the United States, Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, Argentina, and elsewhere. Although SlutWalks are organized to protest victim blaming and slut shaming,¹ the issue of calling women sexualized names and blaming women for men’s violent or aggressive sexual behavior is clearly connected to street harassment. For instance, it is not uncommon for women who object to street harassment to be framed as overly sensitive, unable to “take a compliment” or as provocateurs who were asking for it (e.g. Lewak 2014; Logan 2009). The SlutWalk and Anti-Street Harassment movements are linked in that both are aimed at resisting and dismantling rape culture.² Street harassment, victim blaming, and slut shaming are all rooted in a culture of men’s entitlement and domination and women’s subordination and objectification. The swiftness with which the SlutWalk movement took root and became a global movement suggests growing intolerance for both victim blaming and shaming and street harassment.

In addition, activists, bloggers, and journalists in mainstream media have focused on street harassment in locations such as India, the United Kingdom, and other places across the globe. In 2010 and 2011, street harassment in Egypt, for example, received attention from mainstream media and feminist activists. Even artists are jumping into the conversation. Artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh has become known for posting her anti-street harassment artwork in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. She has been profiled, and her art discussed in *The New York Times*, Huffington Post, National Public Radio, and elsewhere. Fazlalizadeh’s artwork comes with unmistakable messages to street harassers, such as “Women do not owe you their time or conversation” and “Stop Telling Women to Smile” (for more information about her work, see <http://fazstreetart.tumblr.com/>). A film titled *Cairo 678*, released in 2010, is a major motion picture that tells “the story of three fictional women from different backgrounds as they search for justice from daily sexual harassment” (Davies 2011). Another bit of compelling evidence that street harassment is a growing concern for activists and women across the globe is that Anti-Street Harassment Day became the first annual *International Anti-Street Harassment Week* in 2012, marked by rallies, public presentations, educational campaigns, and other events in cities across the world, including the countries of Afghanistan, Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Egypt, Germany, India, Mexico, Pakistan, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, and Yemen (<http://www.meetusonthestreet.org/action/>). Efforts to bring an end the practice of street harassment are now being described by activists as part of a growing social movement. According to Google Trends, the term “street harassment” was not used in a news headline before 2009. However, in August 2010 “street harassment” was mentioned in 38 headlines, in March 2012 “street harassment” was used in 72 headlines, and in September 2013 “street harassment” was used in 100 news headlines (<https://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=%22street%20harassment%22&cmpt=q>). Increased attention to street harassment – including social action directed at documenting, resisting, intervening, and eliminating this social problem – emphasizes the need for scholars and activists to know what the research tells us about street harassment and to consider avenues for future research and action.

Prevalence, victims, and harassers

Studies suggest that men have been sexually harassing women on public streets and in public places for well over a century. Heben reported that records from at least as long ago as the 1800s “document sexual comments which men have made to unfamiliar women in public places” (1994, 2). Walkowitz described street harassment in late Victorian England, noting that the West End of London was at the time a “notorious site for street harassment of respectable women by so-called gentlemen” (1998, 1). Bowman (1993) detailed an account that took place in 1875; in that instance, the victim was a school teacher accosted while traveling by railroad. One scholar described street harassment as “a widespread and vexatious problem for American urban women in the pre-suffrage era” (Johnson 2011). In the 1830s and 1840s, the American Female Moral Reform Society – which had members in more than 500 US cities and towns – “constantly warned” women about the dangers of travel and expressed “alarm over a contagion of male licentiousness, spreading rapidly and endangering women everywhere” (Cohen 1992, 111). The Women’s Municipal League in New York City advocated for women-only subway cars as a means of preventing harassment as early as 1909 (Kearl 2011; Schultz and Gilbert 1996). Japan has had women-only transit cars since 1912 (Krieger 2012); currently, 15 countries offer women-only options on public transportation (Jones 2011). In the 1920s, there was a brief movement to outlaw flirting or the practice of “auto invitation” (Coe 2013). It is clear from these and other accounts that street harassment is not a problem unique to the modern era.

Victims

The majority of studies find that an overwhelming percentage of women experience street harassment, many well before legal adulthood. Prevalence estimates depend on the kind of harassment being considered and range from 30 to 100 percent. A Chicago neighborhood study of 168 mostly African-American and Latina girls and women ages 10–19 years found that 86 percent had been verbally harassed on the street (Nielsen 2009). Gardner’s groundbreaking work indicated that 100 percent of the women in her racially diverse sample ($n = 293$) in the United States had been harassed (1995). Two studies from Canada used data from the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey ($n = 12,300$) and found that 85 percent of the women respondents reported experiencing some form of street harassment (MacMillan et al. 2000), with more than 30 percent reporting being followed in a way that frightened them (Scott 2003) and 53 percent reporting at least one incident of violence (Scott 2003). An earlier study conducted in Canada found that more than 80 percent ($n = 1990$) of women reported experiencing street harassment, with more than 65 percent reporting unwanted sexual comments, more than 50 percent reporting being followed (on foot or in a vehicle), almost 35 percent reporting sexual touch or attempted sexual touch, and slightly less than 30 percent reporting experiences related to indecent exposure (Lenton et al. 1999). A study in the San Francisco Bay area ($n = 100$) found that 61 percent of women experienced street harassment daily or often and 100 percent experienced it at least occasionally (Nielsen 2009). In a 2008 “informal survey” administered by activist Kearl (2010), more than 99 percent of the women and girls who responded, ages 13 to more than 80 years ($n = 811$), reported being subjected to various forms of street harassment, prompting Kearl to describe street harassment as “omnipresent” (11). Kearl’s national study for the organization Stop Street Harassment finds that street harassment is a significant problem across the United States: 65 percent of women reported experiencing street harassment; 57 percent of all women experienced verbal harassment; and 41 percent of women experienced physically aggressive forms, including touching (23 percent), following (20 percent),

flashing (14 percent), and being forced to do something sexual (9 percent) (Stop Street Harassment 2014, 6). In addition, the study found that 25 percent of men experienced street harassment (Stop Street Harassment 2014, 6). It seems not only fair but also important to identify street harassment as a substantial problem, and the data about its prevalence very clearly support that.

Studies indicate that the most frequent victims of street harassment are women and girls. Even so, women and girls are not one homogeneous group, nor are they the only victims. In general, scholars have been “disturbingly silent” about street harassment and race or women of color (Buchanan and Ormerod 2002), but the research that does exist offers compelling evidence that women of color are particularly vulnerable and that their experiences of street harassment are very often both racist and sexist (Chen 1997; Fogg-Davis 2006; Kearl 2010; Madriz 1997a,b,c). Studies find that women of color experience more street harassment and sexual violence than White women (e.g. Kearl 2010; Nielsen 2009; Pain 2001). Nielsen (2009) found that 68 percent of women of color reported harassment daily or often compared to 55 percent of the White women. Fogg-Davis (2006) discussed the street harassment murder of Sakia Gunn (also mentioned in one of the opening vignettes in this article) to illuminate some of the ways that race complicates Black women’s experiences of street harassment, suggesting greater attention to and theorizing about the “connections and differences between lesbian and straight black women” (73). Taken as a whole, studies that are attentive to race find that street harassment victims, offenders, and the incident itself are shaped by race and racism (Fogg-Davis 2006; Kearl 2010; Madriz 1997a,b,c).

Class also intersects with race to shape victimization. Research on the street harassment of runners suggests that class is central, noting that runners who described their harassers regularly viewed them as “working-class” (Gimlin 2010, 276). Miller’s (2007) study of inner city and mostly poor African-American girls poignantly depicted their routine harassment and suggested that they are at particularly high risk of being harassed in neighborhoods that are plagued with extreme social and economic disadvantage – in part because public spaces in those neighborhoods are often dominated by unemployed or criminally employed men who have consistent and easy access to women and girls on the street. Miller (2007) points to the intertwined relationship of gender, race, and class to the sexualized harassment of the African-American girls and young women in her study, using the framework of gendered social organization theory. Gendered social organization theory helps explain crime, violence, and “the ways that gender intersects with street environments and offender networks” (Logan 2010, 638). Despite these studies, the topic of class is rarely addressed in the street harassment literature, and there are many questions left unanswered. For instance, is it possible that the stereotype of the catcalling construction worker shapes women’s perceptions about the class of their street harassers? The current literature provides too few insights about the connections between class, masculinities, and street harassment.

Sexual identity also intersects with gender in ways that shape experiences of harassment. Much of the research literature has been inattentive to this, however, failing to mention sexual identity at all, and/or assuming or implying that street harassment is a problem for heterosexual women exclusively. Recently, however, some research has begun to focus on non-heterosexual populations. McNeil (2012) examined gay and bisexual men’s experiences of street harassment ($n = 331$), finding that approximately 90 percent of his sample reports being harassed (2012). In her qualitative research, Steinbugler’s (2005) analysis of data from same-sex and heterosexual interracial couples ($n = 8$ couples) indicated that public visibility places both heterosexual and queer interracial couples at risk of being harassed or physically assaulted. Steinbugler’s (2005) work highlights the importance of examining the significance of not only race and relationship norms but also intersecting factors that influence street harassment.

Steinbugler's work (2005) calls our attention to street harassment of couples, which brings to light the dearth of information about street harassment directed at more than one victim at a time. This is important because the circumstances for harassment may in fact be highly related, particularly for lesbians and other queer women. Research finds that while gay men are commonly at risk of violence when alone, lesbians are most at risk in pairs and groups (e.g. Comstock 1991). Incidents of hate-motivated physical and sexual violence against members of queer communities very often begin with street harassment (e.g. Meyer 2012), but research suggests that gay men are often targeted when they are in gay spaces, such as gayborhoods and near gay bars. (Comstock 1991; D'Augelli 1992). Those who attack gay men are typically White, heterosexual middle or working class men and boys ages 13–24 years (e.g. Comstock 1991; Strom 2001), and they often premeditate the attack and operate in groups to attack a lone gay man or a gay male couple; often, the attackers outnumber the attacked. In those cases, street harassment is part of the planned attack.

However, when lesbians are victims of anti-gay harassment and violence, they are often attacked in everyday spaces such as parking lots and college campuses (Comstock 1991; D'Augelli 1992), by strangers; often, the attacker is a man and alone, and most often, the lesbian is *not* alone but is with another woman or more than one other woman. Typically, the attacker is a man, but he has not gone to a gay area to find his victim/s, and he has not premeditated the attack. Rather, the harasser has chosen to act in that moment as he interprets visual cues that for him identify the women as lesbians, and central to that interpretation may well be the presence of more than one woman (for more on the links between visibility and violence and sexual orientation, see Comstock 1991; D'Emilio 1983; Logan 2014; Mason 2001; Stanko and Curry 1997).

Feminist and queer scholars and activists have long argued that harassment and violence against gay men and lesbians are about policing gender and sexuality and that the "police" are almost always heterosexual men. But the pattern here, the difference in the circumstances of anti-gay violence against gay men and lesbians, suggests that harassment and violence against lesbians (and other women with women who are viewed as lesbians by their attacker) are linked to rape culture where women are sexual objects and where the male gaze conveys and embodies a sense of domination and ownership. One can argue that the lesbians in these cases are being disciplined for defying feminine and heterosexual norms and for having the temerity to place themselves out of the harasser's sexual reach. Thus, it may be very important for those researching street harassment to consider the differences in how a woman alone is targeted versus how two or more women are targeted, such as in the case of Sakia Gunn (mentioned in the introduction of this article). Researchers also need to consider how race influences this pattern. At the least, we can imagine that lesbians of color have even less permission than White lesbians to violate norms and to decline men's violent overtures.

Harassers

Irrespective of the sex of their victims, research shows that those who harass others in public space are men (e.g. Benard and Schlaffer 1984; Gardner 1995; Kearl 2010; McNeil 2012; Wesselmann and Kelly 2010). There is considerably less research on harassers than on victims, but the little there is suggests that there are two broad, overlapping categories of rationalizations for harassment, both shaped by masculine entitlement: male bonding and control. Some men frame their harassment as human nature, harmless demonstrations of sexual attraction, and sometimes a way to bond with other men. Others explicitly intend to intimidate, shame, terrorize, control, or assault their targets. Quinn (2002) noted that men often view street harassment as

“harmless fun or normal gendered interactions” (386). Benard and Schlaffer found that the majority of men in their study believed that street harassment was fun, harmless, and a cure for boredom and it gave them a “feeling of youthful camaraderie” when they engaged in street harassment with other men (1984, 71). Likewise, Wesselmann and Kelly (2010) and Quinn (2002) found that social bonding among men was a primary factor in street harassment.

However, approximately 15 percent of Benard and Schlaffer’s sample ($n = 60$) “explicitly set out to anger or humiliate their victims”, often using “graphic commentary and threats” (1984, 71). For example, this man explained harassment of women he perceived to be lesbians in this way:

We holla at women. If they don't [respond], some people get violent, some people don't. I may tell them, 'Have a nice day,' my man may tell them 'Fuck you' and throw a bottle at 'em. Because women is out there looking for women... God said when women start liking women and men start liking men, the world is over. We're not looking for the world to be over. We're just trying to make it continue. It's gotta take a man and a woman to create the next child and make the world go around. (Smith et al. 2011, 55)

This man’s entitlement is apparent. In fact, there is a sense of heterosexual patriarchal *obligation*: the man is protecting civilization itself by harassing women, especially when they are not perceived as sexually available to heterosexual men. This harasser’s statement suggests that women who do not respond to street harassment favorably may be labeled lesbians, a phenomenon known as lesbian baiting (e.g. Damiano 1999), that is, rejecting one man’s overtures is tantamount to rejecting all men’s overtures. The views of this harasser may seem extreme, but they illustrate the two broad, overlapping categories of rationalizations for harassment.

Consequences and responses

Negative consequences for victims of street harassment are well documented. Studies report negative psychological and emotional consequences, such as fear, anger, distrust, depression, stress, sleep disorders, self-objectification, shame, increased bodily surveillance, and anxiety about being in public (e.g. Benard and Schlaffer 1984; Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Stanko 1990; Gardner 1995; Kearl 2010; Wise and Stanley 1987; MacMillan et al. 2000). Riger and Gordon (1981) surveyed women in three cities, finding that fear of violence severely restricted many women’s movements in public. Even women who reported no fear or low levels of fear took precautions to avoid sexual violence in public space (Riger and Gordon 1981).

Studies of fear of crime routinely report that women are more afraid in public spaces than men, despite women’s lower reported risk, at least according to official crime statistics, of stranger victimization in public places. Stanko (1990, 1995) and others argue that this is a consequence of women’s fear of sexual violence and argue that it is a rational fear related to experiencing and witnessing a range of sexual violence during their lives (see also Ferraro 1996; Madriz 1997a; Warr 1985; Harris and Miller 2000; Scott 2003). There is little doubt that street harassment contributes to women’s fear of violence (e.g. Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Harris and Miller 2000; Ferraro 1996). For instance, Benard and Schlaffer pointed to processes of socializing women to fear rape when they argued that street harassment during adolescence reinforces “awareness that hostility and sexuality seem to go together” (1984, 71). More than one scholar has discussed the relationship between fear of rape and street harassment (e.g. Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Gardner 1995; Harris and Miller 2000; Kearl 2010; Lenton et al. 1999; MacMillan et al. 2000). Gardner (1995) reminded us that although women can enjoy being in public space, “even these routine pleasures will be experienced with the knowledge of what *can* occur” (emphasis Gardner’s 1995, 2). Street harassment can be the beginning of

an interaction that results in even more serious harm, including rape and murder, and that shapes not only women's fears during the incident of harassment but also women's fears in countless moments to follow.

Responses to street harassment are often framed as either assertive or passive (e.g. Benard and Schlaffer 1984; Fairchild and Rudman 2008). Fairchild and Rudman (2008) noted that coping with street harassment fell into four categories: passive, self-blame, benign, and active, and the majority of their racially diverse sample of 228 women used passive strategies to cope with street harassment (see also Hyers 2007). Passive strategies include ignoring the harasser, pretending the harassment is not taking place, walking in another direction or walking faster, laughing and pretending the harassment is not offensive, and feigning disinterest (e.g. Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Gardner 1995; Hyers 2007). Although passive strategies can overlap, there are subtle differences between similar passive strategies. For instance, ignoring the harasser does not require acting as if one does not notice the harassment; rather, it can be as simple as turning one's head away from the harasser without pretending the harassment is not happening. Some women use active strategies, such as confronting the harasser, explaining why harassment is offensive, non-verbal gestures, or contacting law enforcement or another authority (e.g. Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Hyers 2007). Fairchild and Rudman (2008) found that women who reported more frequent street harassment were more likely to use active strategies. In one of the few studies to look at different forms of harassment and public experiences with prejudice, including racist and sexist harassment, participants who used active responses reported "better consequences on a range of measures," including "feeling agentic in the face of an undesirable situation" (Hyers 2007, 9). Women do not necessarily experience more extreme or threatening street harassment as a result of using passive strategies – that is an empirical question not yet answered – but research indicates that active strategies may help women feel less vulnerable. Benard and Schlaffer wrote that "women who are often in public places learn to get used to harassment and develop their own strategies for avoiding or responding to it" (2008, 71). Nonetheless, research indicates that most often women respond passively. No matter how they respond, the consequences of street harassment shape women's lives in several ways, from how they get to and from work, to where and when they spend time in public space, to how they feel about their bodies, and even how well they sleep.

Where do we need to go and how are we getting there?

Although the majority of studies about street harassment are somewhat narrow in focus, fail to consider multiple intersecting social locations, or offer little in the way of sociological analysis and theoretical understanding, there have been promising developments since Gardner's excellent pioneering study in 1995. Among the more promising discussions about street harassment is Namaste's (1996) theoretical discussion of "genderbashing." Although, like other authors, Namaste (1996) does not offer significant insights about the racial dynamics of street harassment and despite the absence of the term "street harassment," there is no doubt that street harassment is included in the author's broad concept of genderbashing. Focusing on the victimization of gay men, lesbians, and transgender individuals, Namaste argued that street harassment and violence against members of these populations are motivated by a "perceived transgression of normative sex-gender relations" and norms about power and visibility in gendered public space (1996, 221). Fogg-Davis's (2006) work on Black women's experiences of street harassment is also an important contribution to our understanding of street harassment, particularly through an intersectional lens. Understanding how race, gender, and sexuality are policed in public through violence and the threat of violence could help activists and others move closer to a politics of coalition to address violence and the practices of policing and punishing those who are

perceived to fall outside the narrow confines of hierarchal White, heterosexual gender norms (e.g. Namaste 1996).

Future research about street harassment should examine this social problem specifically, rather than as an unmentioned factor in hate crime or a minimized element of women's fear of crime, for example. Sociologists, criminologists, and other scholars should examine the relationship between street harassment and masculinities, the debate about liberty versus security in relation to street harassment, street harassment among youth, adult men's harassment of girls, and various approaches to resisting and ending street harassment, including and especially coalitional approaches that reflect a deep understanding of the intersectional characteristics of street harassment. These and other studies could add meaningfully to our knowledge. It is particularly important that scholars examine street harassment through an intersectional lens and engage with critical race theory and queer theory. Work about street harassment from Fogg-Davis (2006), Davis (1994), and McNeil (2012) shows the promise of that approach for future investigations about how multiple identities shape risk, response, consequence, and more. Activists, victims, bystanders, and policymakers will benefit from knowing more about who does and who does not commit street harassment, when, where, and under what circumstances, and how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation influence experiences of and resistance to street harassment.

Conclusion

Most studies of street harassment have focused at the individual level, for example, examining the direct psychological trauma of victims or their individual responses. However, street harassment is a *social* problem that has societal consequences that co-produce and reinforce inequalities. Street harassment sends messages to its targets, to those who are or would be perpetrators, and to bystanders – gendered, racialized, classed, and sexualized messages about power, violence, equality, civic engagement, public space, and freedom. The idea that violence against women and other marginalized groups operates as a means of controlling and limiting their independence and their public lives has been discussed in feminist literature for years and continues to be so discussed (e.g. Brownmiller 1975; Calazza 2000; Madriz 1997b). It has also long been a focus in the fear of crime literature (e.g. Gordon et al. 1980; Warr 1985).

Warr (1985) remarked, “the social consequences of crime are not limited to those who are directly victimized” (238). Feminists and anti-rape activists have, for decades, focused on indirect victimization as relates to rape and fear of rape (e.g. Brownmiller 1975). The idea of harming an entire group through violence that targets an individual member of that group is part of the logic of hate crime legislation. Although activists and researchers consistently argue that the vast majority of women are affected by street harassment and fear of rape, where and how the law addresses street harassment is quite limited. Perpetrators are unlikely to be in violation of the law if they yell, “Hey, baby;” however, there are other elements of street harassment that are violations of the law, including exposure or public indecency, physical or sexual assault, unlawful restraint, stalking, and terroristic threats. But we should think critically about creating laws to regulate or eradicate street harassment, particularly in relation to the criminalization of racial minorities. Too often, the unintended effect of laws meant to criminalize certain actions is wielded disproportionately against persons of color.

Moreover, such laws present serious challenges for lawmakers and courts. Offensive speech is at the heart of street harassment, and offensive speech is protected by the First Amendment. For instance, hate speech is not typically a criminal act; however, hate speech is often evidence in cases where the perpetrator has committed another crime, such as assault or homicide. In those cases, the law is not targeting the offensive speech. Hate crime laws, generally, focus on conduct

that the court finds especially egregious because the perpetrator has selected his victims on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, religion, national origin, disability, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Nielsen's (2009) research found that there is considerable support for laws that address street harassment, but as of yet, the law is not much of a resource for those who are harassed in public spaces. Moreover, if the law were to be harnessed for this purpose, it is unlikely that it will be universally helpful. There are and should be concerns about deploying the criminal justice system to address street harassment as it is a system deeply shaped by institutional racism. It is not difficult to imagine that making street harassment illegal might well result, for example, in more racial profiling, more stop and frisk policies that target men of color, and more Black and Brown bodies in an already bloated prison industrial complex.

Extralegal efforts to end street harassment have come from leaders and advocates in the global movement to stop this form of violence and social control. Activist organizations have developed resources for women who experience street harassment and pushed for change at local, state, national, and international levels. Both Stop Street Harassment and Hollaback! have trained activists and provided resources in cities all over the world. In October 2014, Hollaback! – which has multiple chapters worldwide – published a “global legal resource on street harassment” for its member cities (<http://www.ihollaback.org/blog/2014/10/15/know-your-rights-guide/>). Stop Street Harassment is a steady presence in mainstream and alternative media outlets, created International Anti-Street Harassment Week, and leads campaigns against companies that trivialize street harassment (<http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/our-work/listofcompanies/>). Collective Action for Safe Spaces, a group in the D.C. metropolitan area, provides free safe rides for some events and holidays and focuses its efforts on workshops, advocacy, and community outreach. Individuals are speaking up and taking action as well. Stop Street Harassment and Hollaback! have collected countless stories of street harassment posted by women of color, White women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex people – victims of street harassment who are making their voices heard. Other examples include an Iowa college student who organized a forum about street harassment (<http://thegazette.com/subject/news/ending-street-harassment-iowa-city-forum-aims-to-stop-threats-catcalls-20140902>), a community group in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago that organized against street harassment (<http://goo.gl/4dd1MF>), and several individuals who posted videos on YouTube aimed at educating the public about street harassment. The law may not be adequately able to address street harassment, particularly without unjustly targeting people of color; however, activist organizations and individuals are working on multiple fronts to address this serious social problem.

Studies indicate that an overwhelming majority of women – from all walks of life – fear and/or have experienced street harassment. Many more studies report that fear of rape – particularly stranger rape – is common among women. It seems without question that street harassment and the threat of street harassment are related to fearing rape – especially when one considers that rapists and harassers who are unknown to their victims often use similar strategies and express similar motives. However, the link between street harassment and fear of rape is another empirical question waiting to be answered. In more recent years, scholars have examined street harassment that targets other groups; however, taken as a whole, we know less about street harassment than we should. Only a handful of studies offer theoretical explanations for street harassment (e.g. Barak 1996; Deegan 1987; Gardner 1995; Gimlin 2010; Quinn 2002); most implicate sexism or heterosexual patriarchal power structures.

The ever-present risk of being harassed compels women to monitor their surroundings, to weigh the risks of crossing the street, taking their children for a walk, walking across a college campus, or running to catch the bus – and of course, there are other targets of street harassment as well. For instance, the risk of being harassed compels girls to monitor their surroundings too, even as

they walk to and from school (Smith, Van Deven, and Huppuch 2011). Researchers might not be interested in studying how many times women on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Main Street are accosted with a “Hey, baby!” but street harassment is far more than that. The specter of street harassment is not just around the corner or outside the raucous bar or on a dark street. Street harassment is in the minds of women and other targets, shaping subjective experiences of public life, provoking fear, doubt, timidity, and uncertainty, and deterring or constraining civic engagement. Meanwhile, street harassment facilitates some men’s claims to public space and their unspoken right to rule that space and to rule the women and other marginalized people in that space.

It is critical that we keep in mind that public space is more than a sidewalk, and it is vital that we consider the consequences of street harassment beyond the sidewalk. Public space is also in the halls of education, government, the business world, and more. Street harassment conveys the message that harassers are entitled to own public space and in a sense to control and violate the people in that space. The message to targets of street harassment is that they should hide, be afraid, pay attention to what potential street harassers want them to do, and wear and say and be. Street harassment robs people of safety, agency, power, and opportunity. Increasingly, activists are writing about and rallying together to address street harassment. It is time that more researchers joined them.

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Short Biography

Laura S. Logan is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Hastings College. In her research, Logan examines a number of issues related to the intersections of gender, race, sexualities, social movements, and violence against marginalized people. She has written several blog posts as a public sociologist, and her work on lesbian social networks and homophily was published in the *Journal of Homosexuality*. Logan is also an activist, currently serving on the Stop Street Harassment board of directors (<http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/>). In her most recent research, Dr. Logan investigates street harassment and fear of rape among queer women.

Notes

* Correspondence address: Dr. Laura S. Logan, Sociology, Hastings College, 710 N Turner Ave Daugherty Center 15, Hastings, NE 68901, USA. E-mail: llogan@hastings.edu

¹ SlutWalk NYC defines slut shaming as “the derogatory, sexist language and policies that are used to shame self-identified women who are perceived as sexual” (<http://www.csgsnyu.org/2011/09/slutwalk-nyc-october-1st-2011/>). This appears to be a fairly standard definition of the term.

² Rape culture is “a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 2005).

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