Adolescents' Experiences of Street Harassment: Creating a Typology and Assessing the

Emotional Impact

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Abstract

Purpose: Research examining young people's experiences of harassment has tended to focus on the school and digital environment. Despite street harassment being identified as a common experience for adult women, very few studies have explored adolescents' experiences of street harassment.

Methodology: A person centred analytical approach, based on experienced reporting, was used to create a typology of street harassment. Reports of street harassment were received from 118 (68 female, 43 male, 7 no gender reported) 11- to 15-year-olds over a 6 to 8 week period.

Findings: Cluster analysis revealed four distinct groups: "predominately verbal", "non-verbal/non-direct", "other incident", and "all forms". Young women and those in the "all forms" group reported experiencing greater negative emotions following the episode of street harassment. Young men were equally as likely as young women to report experiencing street harassment.

Value: The findings uniquely highlight that adolescents experience distinct types of street harassment and some of which are associated with negative emotions.

Keywords: street harassment; Eve teasing; stranger harassment; negative emotions; adolescents; person centred

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Adolescents' experiences of school bullying (Olewus, 2013) and discrimination-based

harassment (Russell *et al.,* 2012) are well documented. However, little is known about young

people's experiences of harassment outside of the school environment apart from digital

harassment (Kowalski *et al.*, 2014). Logically, young people are likely to experience

harassment in other contexts that are not constrained by these school or digital environments.

Despite: (a) the perception that young people are vulnerable and at risk in public spaces from

'stranger danger' (Francis *et al.,* 2017) and (b) evidence that young people spend reduced

time outside because of perceived fear of strangers (Ding *et al.,* 2012), research has only

recently begun to explore how experiences of bullying influence how Canadian youth travel

to school (Cozma *et al.*, 2015).

Although the research by Cozma et al. (2015) focused on bullying, parallels can be

drawn between this research and studies exploring street harassment. Street harassment

represents "unwanted behaviours from strangers that typically occur in public spaces (e.g., in

the street or on public transportation)" (Davidson *et al.*, 2016, p553). According to Davidson

et al. these behaviours include: whistling; leering; sexist, homophobic, or transphobic slurs;

persistent requests for someone's name or number after they have said no; sexual names;

comments; and demands. Therefore, street harassment encompasses seemingly innocent

comments to vulgar suggestions to outright threats which, along with the fear these

behaviours generate, led Kissling (1991) to argue that street harassment contributes to a

culture of "sexual terrorism" (p456). Moreover, Kearl (2010) proposes that street harassment

represents a form bullying behaviour that is motivated by power and disrespect with

commonalities evident in street harassment and bullying behaviours. For example, name

calling and comments are characteristic of verbal bullying (Rivers and Smith, 1994). Despite

street harassment being a common experience for many, relatively few studies have examined the phenomena (Vera-Gray, 2016), especially with young people.

Using data collected from over 2000 9- to 16-year-olds during 1996/7 from the UK, Deakin (2006) examined experiences of harassment. Compared to other forms of harassment, young people were more likely to report experiencing harassment travelling to or from school while in public places and half of the sample reported that they had experienced street harassment. While Deakin's research provides an insight in to the prevalence with which young people experience street harassment in the UK, it is important to note that the data is more than 20 years old and involved retrospective reports. Experience sampling methods overcome recall bias associated with retrospective accounts and maximize ecological validity by asking participants to complete measures when an event has occurred (Shiffman *et al.*, 2008). In the current study we asked a large sample of young people to report every incident of street harassment they experienced over a six to eight-week period so that we could identify a typology of street harassment. Adopting experience sampling allowed us to reduce potential recall bias.

To create the street harassment typology cluster analysis was used. Cluster analysis, a person centered analytical approach, identifies groups of individuals based on their scores on an indicator enabling naturally co-occurring experiences to be examined (Anderberg, 1973). In the context of street harassment, cluster analysis would identify distinct groups based on the young people's actual experiences whereby members of the same group have similar experiences of street harassment which are distinct from the groups to which they do not belong. However, it is important to note that interpretation of the clusters is often highly subjective (Henry *et al.,* 2005). Cluster analysis has been used to examine other forms of harassment such as cyber (Betts *et al.*, 2017), face-to-face (Lovegrove and Cornell, 2014), and workplace (Leon-Perez *et al.*, 2014) bullying. Despite the benefits afforded by cluster

analysis regarding creating groups based on common experiences, to date no study has

adopted such an analytical framework to examine adolescents' experiences of street

harassment; something which the current study addressed.

Although most research examining street harassment has focused on women, possibly

because street harassment is seen as an expression of violence against women (Davidson *et*

al., 2016), Laniya (2005) argues that it is important to recognise men also experience street

harassment. Based on research examining children's experiences of peer harassment and

bullying, it is possible that comparable gender differences in experiences of street harassment

will emerge. Males frequently report experiencing higher level of physical harassment and

bullying (Nishina and Juvonen, 2005) and attacks on property (Betts *et al.,* 2015) whereas

females more frequently report verbal (Nishina and Juvonen, 2005) and social (Betts *et al*.,

2015) forms. However, not all studies have reported such gender differences in young

people's experiences of peer harassment (von Marées and Petermann, 2010). Therefore, the

current study will examine gender differences in young people's experiences of street

harassment.

Few studies have examined the impact of street harassment on young people; however,

research with adult females suggests that experiences of street harassment are linked to

negative emotions (Davidson *et al*., 2016; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008). Stranger

harassment in public spaces also reduces women's perceptions of safety while travelling

alone at night (Macmillian *et al*., 2000) and such experiences indirectly contribute to

restricted movements (Fairchild and Rudman, 2008). Adolescent and young adult

experiences of 'Eva teasing' (a form of street harassment) are associated with negative

emotions and restricted movements (Talboys *et al*., 2017), avoidance of school

(Bhagavatheeswaran *et al*., 2016), and poorer mental health outcomes and suicidal ideation

(Talboys, 2015). Further, adolescent females are twice as likely as adolescent males to report

worrying about stranger danger when considering neighbourhood safety (Craver *et al.,* 2008), more frequently report a sense of unease when they are stared at by a stranger or are alone at night in the street (Zani *et al.*, 2001), and are more likely to experience street harassment (Meza-de-Luna and García-Falconi, 2015). Therefore, the emotional impact of street harassment will also be examined.

 Gender differences in adolescents' reported emotions following an incident of street harassment are expected for three reasons. First, adolescent females are more likely to report harassment as more harmful than adolescent males (Hand and Sanchez, 2000). Second, adult women experience greater negative emotional responses to street harassment than adult males (Bastomski and Smith, 2017). Finally, males increasingly restrict their emotional expression during adolescence (Polce-Lynch *et al.*, 2001) and, as such, their emotional reaction may be lower than females.

The present study had three aims: (a) to create a typology of adolescents' experiences of street harassment, (b) to explore the emotional impact of the incidents of street harassment, and (c) to examine gender differences in adolescents' reports of street harassment and the associated emotional impact.

Method

Participants

All eligible 11-to 15-year-olds attending 3 secondary schools across the UK, were encouraged to complete a report when they experienced street harassment over a 6 to 8 week period during the summer term of 2016. Reports were received from 118 (68 female, 43 male, and 7 no gender reported) young people (M age = 12.95, SD = 1.15). When asked about their ethnicity, 72% of the sample identified as white, 6.8% as Black, 10.2% as Asian, 5.9% as mixed, and 5.1% of the sample did not report their ethnicity.

Measures

Experiences of street harassment. Participants were presented with 10 different forms of street harassment that included vehicles (i.e., "vehicle slowed, I was watched" and "beeped at with a car horn"), physical (i.e., "cornered", "had bag taken/grabbed", "tripped up", "pushed/hit", and "stared at"), and verbal (i.e., "talked about behind back", "whispered about", "called names", and "laughed at") and then asked to indicate which one(s) had happened to them. The participants also had the option of selecting "other" if they felt that their experience was different. Responses were coded as 1 = experienced and 0 = not experienced. Finally, the participants were asked to use their own words to report what had happened and how it made them feel.

Emotional reaction. A modified version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule for Children (Ebesutani *et al*., 2012) which included 27 positive (e.g., "happy") and negative (e.g., "afraid") emotions, was used to assess the participants' emotional reaction to the street harassment they reported. Participants indicated how the incident made them feel by selecting as many emotions as needed.   Each emotion endorsed received a score of 1, if an emotion was not selected it was coded as 0. A negative emotion score was created by totalling the number of negative emotions the young people reported, the emotion jittery was excluded as this had a negative item-total correlation. The final negative emotion scale had acceptable internal consistency, $\alpha = .72$, 95% CI [.64, .79].

Procedure

Young people were given the option of completing an online or paper version of the questionnaire whenever they experienced street harassment during the six to eight week period. The young people were informed that there were no correct answers, that individual responses would be kept confidential unless they gave serious cause for concern, and that all responses would be anonymous. Consent was initially given by the head teacher at the

schools and letters were sent home to inform parents of the study. Parents were asked to inform the school if they did not want their son/daughter to participate in the research. In addition, the young people gave their consent.

Results

Typology of street harassment

Cluster analysis (Ward's method) was used to examine whether distinct groups emerged according to young people's experiences of street harassment. The participants' reports for the 11 types of street harassment were entered in to the analysis.

Four distinct groups emerged from the cluster analysis that were validated using direct discriminate function analysis ($p < .001$, Youngman, 1979). The groups were labelled according to the distribution of the means which are shown in Table 1. The "predominately verbal" group was the largest (n = 49, 42%) and was characterised by endorsing all forms of street harassment; however, the most frequent forms of street harassment experienced by this group were name calling, being laughed at, and being talked about behind their back. The second largest group was the "non-verbal/non-direct" cluster ($n = 33$, 28%). This group was characterised as experiencing high levels of being beeped at with a car horn, being stared at, and vehicle slowed and no other forms of street harassment. The "other incident" group reported very low levels of the street harassment types listed but rather unanimously indicated that their experiences of harassment fell in to the other category. This group had 26 members (22%). The "all forms" group had the highest reports of all types of street harassment and comprised individuals who reported that they had experienced all forms of street harassment, although there were notable peaks for verbal forms of harassment. However, this was the smallest group with 10 members (8%).

Insert Table 1 about here

The participants' free text responses were used to further explore the nature of the street harassment incidents experienced by the "other incident" group. Common to all the responses was a perception that the young person was experiencing threatening behaviour or unwanted attention. These behaviours were often ambiguous in nature but were interpreted by the young people as threatening. For example,

> *"I was in the park with James and Stuart and a man started cornering us in the park*
> *pretending to be on the phone and then after 5 minutes he started to come in the park*
> *and started coming towards us and so we grabbed our bikes and went quick"* (female,
> aged 12).

To examine whether there were gender differences in the membership to the four groups of street harassment, a chi-square test was used. Although females provided more overall reports of harassment than males for each harassment type except all forms (Table 1), there were no significant gender differences in young people's reports of street harassment, $\chi^2(3) = 2.60$, $p = .458$.

Emotional reaction to street harassment

Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for negative emotions according to gender and harassment type. For negative emotions there appears to be variation in the reported emotions that young people experience following an episode of street harassment. To examine whether differences occurred according to gender and type of harassment in the reported negative emotions following a street harassment incident, a 2 x 4 (gender [male, female] x type of harassment [predominately verbal, non-verbal/non-direct, other incident, all forms) unrelated ANOVA was performed. The dependent variable was the reported negative emotion following the street harassment incident. When interpreting the results of the ANOVA (Table 2), it should be noted that the Levene's test was significant indicating the variance in negative emotion was not equal across the street harassment groups, $F(7,102) =$

2.40, $p = .026$, the data was not normally distributed, Kolmogorov-Smirnov = .193, $df = 116$, $p = <.001$, and the group sizes unequal.

There was a significant main effect of type of harassment. Tukey post hoc tests revealed that young people who belonged to the all forms group reported experiencing significantly higher levels of negative emotions following episodes of street harassment than those in the non-verbal/non-direct group, $p = .029$. There were no other significant differences between the type of harassment and the reports of emotion suggesting the reported negative emotions were generally similar irrespective of harassment type.

There was also a significant main effect of gender; young women reported experiencing significantly higher negative emotions following an episode of street harassment than males. There was no significant interaction between harassment type and gender.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The current study examined young people's experiences of street harassment using an experience based method to create a typology. Four distinct patterns of harassment emerged: predominately verbal, non-verbal/non-direct, other, and all forms. Females reported experiencing higher levels of negative emotions following street harassment and those who belonged to the all forms group also reported elevated levels of negative emotions following street harassment compared to the non-verbal/non-direct group.

The predominately verbal group most frequently experienced name calling, being laughed at, and being talked about. Consistent with research examining young people's experiences of school based bullying (Wang *et al.*, 2009), the predominately verbal group was the largest. Although this group did not report elevated negative emotion, exploring the

impact of street harassment on those who were most hurt by the verbal comments would be a logical next step. Previous research with adults has reported that those who experienced name calling during childhood and reported the experiences to be particularly hurtful were more negative about their past experiences and recalled that the name calling negatively impacted on their school life (Crozier and Skliopidou, 2002).

The second largest group was the non-verbal/non-direct cluster which was characterised by experiencing high levels of being beeped at with a car horn, being stared at, and vehicle slowed. Despite debate about whether individuals can accurately determine whether they are being stared at (Sheldrake, 2005), research with children has reported that they can accurately determine when they are being stared at above chance level (Sheldrake, 1998). In the context of street harassment, it has been suggested that stares represent a form of dehumanising behaviour (Roenius, 2016). From the data we collected, it is not possible to determine why this group were the targets of such behaviours. Therefore, in future researchers may wish to consider whether a particular trait makes young people vulnerable to such forms of harassment.

The other incident group accounted for 20% of the reports from the young people and for these individuals the street harassment was distinct from the pre-defined experiences that were derived from the previous definitions of street harassment (e.g., Davidson *et al*., 2016). To further understand the experiences of the other incident group, the free text comments provided by the young people were considered. The incidents of street harassment reported by this group were often ambiguous in nature but were interpreted as threatening. The ambiguity that typified the experiences of those belonging to the other incident group, directly supports Bailey's (2017) observation that street remarks can have different meanings to the various individuals involved and that these meanings can often be contradictory. Interpreting the behaviour of others relies on an individual's social processing ability and

attributions. Variation in children's response strategies to ambiguous behaviours also vary by the perceptions of intent of the peer engaging in the ambiguous behaviour (Dodge *et al.*, 1984). Consequently, a young person's ability to interpret street harassment may represent a potential confounding variable. Therefore, to fully examine this potential attribution bias, future research should explore how young people interpret and make sense of ambiguous behaviours that may constitute street harassment.

The final group was labelled as all forms and was akin to findings from other studies using cluster analysis to explore forms of harassment where groups were identified that experienced high levels of harassment (Leon-Perez *et al*., 2014). Given this groups' unique experience, they may be particularly at risk of negative outcomes following street harassment. Previous research focusing on chronic targets of bullying has found that these children are at greater risk of mental health problems and academic difficulties (Bowes *et al*., 2013).

There was no significant variation in the composition of the four groups according to the young person's gender. Therefore, our findings suggest that young males are equally as likely as young females to report experiences of street harassment. This finding is consistent with previous research with adults that has also found no gender differences in incidences of street harassment (Bastomski and Smith, 2017). However, the current findings are counter to previous research that has reported gender differences in young people's experiences of bullying and harassment (Betts *et al.,* 2015; Nishina and Juvonen, 2005). One potential explanation for this finding resides in the fact that street harassment is often a one-off episode whereas bullying behaviours are often used to maintain social status within peer networks (Volk *et al.,* 2014). Specifically, adolescent males may engage in more physical forms of aggression with their peers because their networks are characterised by physical activity whereas adolescent females' social networks tend to be maintained by self-disclosure and

intimacy (Betts *et al.,* 2015). Although there were no significant gender differences in young

people's experiences of street harassment, as with the previous research with adults

(Bastomski and Smith, 2017) and adolescents (Hand and Sanchez, 2000), adolescent females

in our sample reported greater negative emotions following an episode of street harassment.

While this finding may reflect adolescent males' tendency to restrict their emotional

expression (Polce-Lynch *et al*., 2001), it is important to recognise the methods used in this

study overcome the issue of women having a greater tendency to remember negative events

an argument previously used to explain why women report more fear associated with an

episode of street harassment (Bastomski and Smith, 2017).

Young people belonging to the all forms group reported the highest level of negative

emotion. This elevated level of negative emotions may be reflective of the severity and

nature of this type of harassment. The lack of a significant difference in the emotional

response for those belonging to the all forms group and the other incident group may be

accounted for, not in terms of the frequency of the event but, by how the young people

process the event. Specifically, young people belonging to the other incident group

interpreted ambiguous behaviour as threatening and previous research has reported that

ambiguous behaviour interpreted as negative are associated with greater levels of anxiety

(Murris and Field, 2008).

As noted in the results section, the data violated the underlying assumptions of the

ANOVA. However, Schmider *et al.* (2010) report that ANOVAs are robust to such

violations. It is also important to acknowledge that the street harassment typology was

identified in the UK. Therefore, because of subtle differences in some aspects of street

cultures (Brookman *et al.,* 2011), the typology may not be universal. Consequently, future

research should aim to examine the applicability of the proposed typology in other cultural

contexts. The current study also only examined the immediate impact of street harassment

with regards to the initial emotional reaction and researchers should also explore how young people cope with street harassment for two reasons. First, Gardner (1995) reported several strategies that adult women used to deal with street harassment such as changing their appearance, but it remains unclear whether adolescents adopt similar strategies and the relative success of these strategies. Second, the coping style that young people adopt when they experience bullying impacts on their adjustment (Gardner *et al.*, 2017).

The implications from the current findings are both theoretical and practical. From a theoretical stance it is clear that young people's experiences of street harassment are distinct, and we have proposed a typology of street harassment that is reflective of both adolescent females and males. The strength of this typology is that it is underpinned by data which was collected in an experienced based manner so as not to be biased by participants' memories as previous typologies may be. Also, by enabling young people to provide their own accounts we were able to understand episodes of street harassment that fell outside of the previous definitions. Therefore, this typology provides an important and unique contribution to the literature. From a practical perspective, the findings of the current study have implications for how practitioners respond to the calls of authors such as Laniya (2005) regarding how to best educate young people about street harassment. Our findings suggest that enabling young people to interpret the behaviour of others, and identify potential street harassment, will enable them to better manage the negative impact it has on them. However, whatever programme is designed to educate and support adolescents who experience street harassment it is important to recognise the potential un-intended consequences of the material. Weiss (2016) argues that one of the un-intended consequences of the apps designed to make women aware of street harassment, is that they may ultimately create women free zones.

In summary, the current study identified a person centred typology of street harassment in adolescents that overcomes recall bias. Female adolescents reported that they experienced

greater negative emotions than males following an episode of harassment. Together, these

findings highlight the significance of street harassment for young people and the unique

variation in their experiences.

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