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# **Everyday self-defence: Hollaback narratives, habitus and resisting street harassment**

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*Street harassment is recognised as an ‘everyday’ form of violence against women. Influenced by contemporary sociologies of everyday life, this article examines women responses to street harassment, drawing on over 500 first person narratives submitted to the website of Hollaback London. The narrative structure highlights women’s actions, which (like street harassment) have generally been considered inconsequential. Quantitative content analysis reveals the extent and variety of strategies employed by women, including speaking back, calling on others for help, physically fighting-back, walking away and an array of ‘small’, everyday actions and gestures that aim to resist harassment. I argue that these responses comprise everyday self-defence practice. Furthermore, the notion of narrative habitus is employed to argue that Hollaback narratives do not just describe harassment, but that reading narratives can generate dispositions for self-defence. Narrative analysis reveals the way that satire is employed to make space for women’s successful self-defence. I argue that Hollaback narratives do not just offer storylines or scripts for resisting street harassment but foster a style for doing so. Analysis considers the limits to narratively motivated self-defence. This research demonstrates that, in order to ‘see’ women’s resistance, we need to pay close attention to the everyday as the site of both gendered oppression and moments of liberation.*

Harassment in public places is part of women's everyday lives. Street harassment broadly consists of an array of 'everyday intrusions' (Vera-Gray 2016): being stared at or followed, unwanted conversations, unsolicited commentary or 'street remarks' (Gardner 1995), being touched, groped and sexually assaulted in public places such as the street, or semi-public places such as public transport, shops or leisure venues (Fileborn 2014; Kissling 1991; Logan 2015; Vera-Gray 2017). This article focuses on women's experiences and responses to harassment,<sup>1</sup> noting that gender intersects with other axes of harassment including 'race', class, disability, religion, age and sexuality (Fileborn 2018). Surveys report between 30-100% of women experiencing street harassment, depending on the definition used (Logan 2015: 201). Nonetheless, ambiguity complicates measurement, and statistical quantification arguably obscures women's efforts to avoid street harassment (Kelly and Radford 1990; Vera-Gray 2018). Conventional understandings tend to frame it as a nuisance that does no real harm (Wise and Stanley 1987; Fileborn 2018), effectively silencing women's complaints (Davis 1994; Fileborn 2018; Vera-Gray 2018). The cumulative effects of street harassment are wide-ranging, including poor emotional and physical health, feelings of blame, self-objectification, and a lack of bodily or spiritual identity (Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Stop Street Harassment 2014; Davis 1994; Vera-Gray 2016). Furthermore, women's greater fear of crime can be attributed to experiencing street harassment (Macmillan et al. 2000; Stanko 1990; Vera-Gray 2018). Undertaking 'safety work' - an array of adaptations, responses and practices to avoid harassment - is a drain on women's time, and limits their use of public space (Fanghanel 2016; Kissling 1991; Koselka 1997; Stanko 1990; Valentine 1989; Vera-Gray 2018).

This article connects contemporary online activism contesting street harassment with women's in-the-moment responses, drawing on first-person narratives (also referred to as

accounts or stories) from the London branch website of Hollaback, a global feminist organisation which documents and challenges street harassment. Women's narratives enable us to 'see' everyday self-defence, which, like street harassment, is often considered inconsequential. I draw on Hollander's definition of self-defence practice as: 'women's use of any of a range of strategies – be they physical, verbal or emotional, to deter an immanent assault or resist an assault in progress' (2018: 2). Whilst it has long been acknowledged that women fight back and possess 'unacknowledged knowledge' about how to do so (Wise and Stanley 1987: 11), this article draws on the concept of the narrative habitus (Frank 2010; Fleetwood 2016) to explore how activist narratives can inspire women's on-street self-defence practice.

Given the 'everydayness' of street harassment, I draw on contemporary everyday life sociology, contending that, as power operates in the minutiae of social life, so does struggle (Gardiner 2000: 207; Pink 2012). Emerging from cultural studies, everyday life sociology is attentive to social practice, aesthetics, language and interpersonal ethics (Gardiner 2000; Highmore 2010; Pink 2012). Narrative is a form of everyday culture: it is both of, and about, everyday life. As this article demonstrates, narrative is not just *about* moments of resistance, but is also a way to make sense. And, as the article suggests, narrative may be a resource for everyday forms of resistance. First, research on resistance to sexual violence and street harassment is reviewed. Next, I outline the concept of narrative habitus as it relates to street harassment, followed by a discussion of research methods. Quantitative content analysis reveals the extent and array of everyday self-defence described in Hollaback narratives; these actions are argued to comprise everyday self-defence practice. Furthermore, I suggest that reading narratives can generate dispositions for self-defence. Hollaback narratives do not just offer storylines or scripts for resisting street harassment but foster a style for doing so, albeit within the limits proscribed by the habitus. Throughout, this research demonstrates that, in

order to ‘see’ women’s resistance, we need to pay close attention to the everyday as the site of both oppression and liberation.

### **RESEARCH REVIEW: RESISTANCE AND SELF-DEFENCE**

Research documents women’s resistance to rape and sexual violence, which Kelly describes broadly, as: ‘to oppose actively, to fight to refuse to co-operate with or submit’ (1988: 181). This definition includes both collective feminist organising, campaigning and consciousness-raising *and* individual practices of recovery, coping, safety-work and fight-backs (Kelly 1988; Vera-Gray 2018). New communication technologies enable novel modes of campaigning and consciousness raising, exemplifying Fraser’s notion of ‘subaltern counter-publics’ as spaces in which to regroup and make new meanings with a view to changing society at large (Powell 2015). For example, Salter (2013) examines online practices of ‘naming and shaming’ by victims of sexual violence and Vitis and Gilmour (2018) analyse online art as resistance to online harassment. Hollaback is arguably one of the largest online feminist counter-publics (Fileborn 2014). Established in 2005, it is a global network of local branches with their own web pages to which women can submit their accounts of street harassment. Hollaback can function as a site of informal justice by offering validation, affirmation and a space in which women can be heard (Fileborn 2016).

Research comprehensively demonstrates that women employ a range of ‘self protective’ actions in response to rape and serious sexual assault, with little chance of further serious injury (Clay-Warner 2002; Edwards et al. 2014; Tark and Kleck 2014; Ullman 2007). Hollander concludes that 70-80% of women employ some form of self-defensive strategy when faced with a sexual assault, despite presumably having no training (2018; 1-2). Resistance is not solely physical, however. Jordan (2005: 547) poignantly describes the ‘mental and inner resistance’ of victims of a serial rapist: ‘the choice between submission and

empowerment is not necessarily best understood as a decision to act physically but occurs mentally'. Likewise, Wade (1997) describes victims' spontaneous, 'small' acts including apparent compliance and imagined conversations with abusers. Valli powerfully captures the small acts of 'edgework' undertaken by women in the face of ongoing domestic violence (2007).

Gardner (1995) developed a typology of women's 'strategies' for responding to street harassment, including ignoring, deny, blocking, staged compliance (such as smiling and nodding), feigned surprise and answering back. Whilst these strategies are physical in so far as they involve bodies, they do not require physical strength. According to Gardner, women's strategies worked to 'redefine the situation' (1995: 221). As well as speaking back to harassers, women may report street harassment, albeit rarely (Fileborn 2018; Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Hyers 2007; Stop Street Harassment 2014). Koselka (1997) describes women 'boldly' taking ownership of public space in spite of their fear of harassment: 'walking can be seen as a political act: women 'write themselves onto the street'' (Koselka 1997: 316).

Yet, we lack an adequate vocabulary to describe women's strategies for responding to street harassment (Gardner 1995). Indeed, women's successful self-defence against men's violence remains culturally unfamiliar (Cermele 2010; Hollander 2009; Wise and Stanley 1987). Notions of (especially white, heterosexual) women's supposedly caring nature and physical weakness tend to render successful physical self-defence an unlikely scenario (Cermele 2010; Hollander 2009; Weseley 2006). Silences around women's successful self-defence abound. Rape prevention advice tells women how to avoid rape and what to do afterwards but remains silent on effective defences (McCaughey 1997). News reports describe women's successful self-defence as lucky rather than deliberate (Hollander and Rogers 2014) and focus group research finds that although women are more likely to

recognise and comment on women's resistance, both men and women tend to frame successful self-defence as exceptional (Hollander 2002).

Women undoubtedly employ a variety of collective and individual strategies for self-defence in response to sexual violence and street harassment, although researchers have seldom described them as such. Furthermore, scant research has examined how women come to be able to defend themselves. Gardner (1995) found that two main 'rhetorics' informed women's responses to street harassment. Whilst traditional 'feminine' rhetoric offered some comeback (for example, by challenging 'ungentlemanly' behaviour), feminist political rhetoric offered little practical advice. Research on 'battered' women's retaliatory violence tends to locate its roots in women's violent victimisation (Downs et al. 2007; Larance and Miller 2017; Wesley 2006). Self-defence training may enable women to defend themselves. Feminist and empowerment-based self-defence training effectively builds women's capacity to avoid sexual violence and undertake self-defence when attacked (Brecklin 2008; Hollander 2014, 2018; Jordan and Mossman 2018; Kelly and Sharp-Jeffs 2016; Hollander 2018). Feminist self-defence may be understood as a form of 'physical feminism' that can 'rewrite the script' of women's helplessness, and men's power with the potential for both individual empowerment and wider social change (McCaughey 1997). Nonetheless, specialist training for women is extremely hard to find (Kelly and Sharps-Jeff 2016). This research examines how women might employ self-defence in their everyday lives, and how feminist forms of storytelling activism (like Hollaback) might enable women to do so.

## **NARRATIVE HABITUS**

Narrative habitus (Fleetwood 2016; Frank 2010) theorises connections between stories and social practices. It is apt for analysing how Hollaback narratives, as a form of

quotidian culture (Highmore 2010), come to bear on women's self-defence, as a form of everyday social practice (Pink 2012).

Bourdieu's *Logic of Social Practice* (1990) aims to overcome the structure agency problem in social theory. He argues that social practice is structured through the embodiment of sets of dispositions, which he calls habitus. These subjective dispositions reflect our objective circumstances including class and gender (Krais 2006). Dispositions, which we experience as a 'feel for the game' shape but don't completely determine social action. Dispositions imply an adjustment to objective reality; in effect, the habitus 'inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is already denied' (Bourdieu, 1990: 54).

Women's objective risk of sexual violence shapes their habitus. For Cahill, 'rape culture not only acts upon but in fact partly constructs female bodily comportment' (2009: 364). From a Bourdieuan perspective, 'rituals of safety' (Stanko 1990, 16) such as avoiding particular places, dressing modestly or avoiding eye contact with men in public, are a 'feel for the game'; an adjustment to the reality of sexual violence. However habits hide strategic choices: safety work comprises individual adjustments that *become* habitual, rather than unconscious responses to external structures (Vera-Gray 2018). Habits may be reworked too. Although women are socialised to use their bodies in limited ways, learning to 'throw like a girl' (Young 1990), women may seek out self-defence training in response to the threat (or experience of) sexual violence, and in undertaking training, may re-work the feminine habitus (McCaughey 1997).

Bourdieu understood habitus as largely pre-discursive, but famously stated that habitus generates 'schemes of perception, conception and action which are the precondition of all objectification and apperception' (1990: 6). Thus, habitus connects ways of seeing to a person's social position and experience. Similarly, narrative theorists contend that we know the world through narrative (Bruner 1991). Drawing on both approaches, the concept of



narrative habitus draws attention to how social class, gender, ethnicity and so on shape the narrative construction of the world (Fleetwood 2016). Particular social fields are home to narratives about how the world is, and how we can and should act upon it. An array of discourses, idioms, genres, subject positions and vocabularies and so on pertaining to social fields are embodied in the habitus as storied and storytelling dispositions. If habitus generates a particular 'feel for the game', narrative habitus sums up our embodied sense of what makes a good story (Fleetwood 2016). Although Bourdieu is often criticised for making little space for agency, language and storytelling are inherently inventive and agential (Fleetwood 2016).

Women's narratives are not freely chosen, but reflect diverse discourses about gender, and in particular a abundance of 'common sense' advice, warnings and instructions about safety and danger (Stanko 1997; McCaughey 1997; Gardner 1997; Vera-Gray 2018). These discourses loom large, shaping how women make sense of and navigate public space. Mehta and Bondi argue that: 'women embody discourses that construct them as vulnerable and physically powerless, particularly in the face of male violence' (1999, 77). Drawing on Foucault, Fanghanel argues that a *dispositif* of control constrains women's use of public space through the production of a fearful femininity (2016). For Marcus, the 'language of rape' acts as a 'guide of comprehensibility which we might feel impelled to use as a way of organising interpretations of events and actions. We may be swayed by it, even when it is not in our best interests' (2013: 391).

Discourses about safety and sexual violence are profoundly impactful, however women do not just listen to stories; they tell them too. Wise and Stanley (1987) argue that women share knowledge about managing sexual violence, and Stanko (1990) reports that women draw on stories told by other women in their social milieu. Danger stories are not absorbed uncritically; advice may be adopted, adapted, or rejected (Sandberg and Rönnblom 2013). Koselka describes respondents 'self-talking', drawing on discourses about fear *and*

freedom: ‘they tried to convince themselves that there is no need to fear’ (1997: 306, see also Sandberg and Rönnblom 2013). Likewise, subaltern counter-publics (like Hollaback) make space for alternatives to the ‘dominant discourse of doomed victimhood’ (Seith and Kelly 2003: 6). Thus, the concept of narrative habitus offers a way to connect the objective reality of sexual violence and women’s agency in managing it. It enables us to develop analytical connections between storytelling forms of resistance and women’s embodied practice.

## METHOD

Analysis draws on first person narratives publicly available on the website of Hollaback London. Hollaback invites people to ‘share their story’ (either first hand or as a bystander) to document and contest street harassment: ‘By sharing your story, you change the way people talk about and understand harassment’. Here, storytelling is, explicitly, a form of feminist resistance: an invitation to compose a ‘counter-narrative to the mainstream silencing and exclusion of women’s experiences of street harassment’ (Fileborn 2014: 33). But, beyond a very broad definition of street harassment, and an invitation to ‘share’, Hollaback does little to shape narratives: all accounts submitted are posted online and submissions are subject to minimal editing (only for spelling mistakes, and anonymisation). Despite ostensibly being about experiences of *victimisation*, Hollaback narratives describe women’s responses in detail too. Although Hollaback never encourages women to respond to harassment, readers sometimes interpreted ‘Hollaback’ as encouragement to literally ‘holler’ at harassers. As such, Hollaback stories are not solely about victimisation, but are also about collective and individual resistance to street harassment.

Hollaback narratives do not represent all women, like online activism generally (Fileborn 2014; Salter 2013). However, they reflect a large and diffuse community of young, tech-savvy women in and around London. Hollaback does not collect data about users, but by

inference most narratives were written by women (including self-described trans-women) describing various life stages, for example, child-care, college and work. Although explicit reference was sometimes made to race and sexuality (but not class) there was insufficient data to undertake an intersectional analysis.

Narratives may be personal, but storytelling is a collective activity, albeit one that is hard to trace online. Although readers can click on a button to say 'I've got your back' in reference to a particular narrative, there is no opportunity for discussion or dialogue. Hollaback also has off-line presence, for example staging art interventions or workshops involving sharing experience. In an interview, the branch leader reflected that workshops are largely attended by young women; stories may be shared because of their typicality, or conversely because of their exceptional or unusual nature (see also Fileborn 2018). Whilst all narrative contexts encourage some kinds of stories more than others, Hollaback is unusual in offering no possibility for evaluation or discussion. As such, it includes narratives describing successes (i.e. smart comebacks, men's apologies, onlookers approval), as well as equivocal narratives in which women's actions had little discernable impact, or even resulted in an escalation of violence. There may be experiences that women chose *not* to story for Hollaback, but it is very hard to trace what is not said (Presser, 2019). Hollaback narratives cannot be read as a record of street harassment in a straightforward sense, but should properly be interpreted as a collection of stories interpreting experiences.

Centring women's narratives reflects feminist concerns with valuing women's experiences and knowledge (Cermele 2010; Wise and Stanley 1987; Smith 1987). Whilst narratives describe highly personal and sometimes upsetting incidents, they are explicitly public accounts. Research permission was secured through careful consultation with a London Hollaback branch leader. Whilst narratives displayed online are anonymised, extra care was taken to remove identifying details and pseudonyms are used. Care was taken to

read and interpret whole narratives in context (Reissman 1993: 61). Likewise, McGarry and Walklate (2015) emphasise sensitivity to the original purposes, forms and functions of victim testimony. To this end, analysis was supported by a year of participant observation of online activism (including submitting my own narrative).

Analysis focuses on a single city, London, where I live. I am therefore familiar with places described and cultural norms, enabling me to read narratives in context. I read all accounts published by Hollaback from 1st January 2012 to 31st of December 2017 and analysed 528 first-person narratives (the total after setting aside a small number of bystander accounts and commentaries). Drawing on five years' of stories offers insight into a large number of personal experiences. Submissions to Hollaback were typically between a few sentences to a few hundred words long. Each account was read and analysed for narrative structure, genre, rhetoric, vocabulary and grammar; abductive analysis generated theory (Reissman 1993). I also quantitatively coded each incident described (totalling 546 incidents; some narratives described more than one incident) and relative frequencies of type of attack and responses were calculated. In these narratives, harassment typically occurred on the street (71 percent) or public transport (17 percent). Most narratives described a lone woman; harassers were usually lone men, but women also described pairs or groups of harassers.

### **NARRATIVES DESCRIBE SELF-DEFENCE**

By inviting narratives of street harassment, Hollaback explicitly values stories that were often dismissed or disparaged elsewhere (see also Dimond et al. 2013). As such, Hollaback 'co-constructs' narratives by making everyday experiences 'story-able' (Fileborn 2018: 3). Most are *testimonio*: narratives that bear witness to the lived experiences of harm by the narrator and others like them (McGarry and Walklate 2015). *Testimonio* is individual

and personal, but – by speaking as a member of the harmed group – it is also collective and political. Testimonio claims a position of marginality that speaks truth to power (ibid).

As narratives that bear witness, they were rich in detail: the place and nature of the incident were described in over 99 percent of first person accounts. Reported speech and close descriptions were often included. Women’s narratives describe similar kinds of street harassment to those previous recorded (Gardner 1995; Logan 2015; Vera-Gray 2017). Verbal harassment was the most common (68 percent), but 28 percent described physical contact including touching, groping, grabbing, sexual assault and assault. 14 percent described being followed or persistently stared at. Clearly street harassment is not ‘just’ name-calling.

Hollaback narratives feature women as agents, unlike dominant discourses that tend to rule out women’s successful resistance. As others have noted, telling one’s story resists silencing, and can enable women to reclaim subjectivity, denied in sexual harassment and assault (Cahill 2009; Fileborn 2018; Serisier 2018). In particular, feminist rhetoric on Hollaback offers a ‘frame’ for interpretation: by connecting individual experience with the wider story sexism and misogyny on the street, posters reported reduced feelings of blame and culpability (Dimond et al. 2013).

Women’s responses to harassment are emphasised by the structure of narrative. According to Todorov, all narratives feature: i) a state of equilibrium, ii) breakdown of equilibrium and iii) return to order (1971). Anna’s brief narrative is illustrative of this conflict/resolution structure:

Equilibrium: Trying to get on the central line [on the underground train]

Conflict: a man who had been watching me at the bottom of the stairs stood in the middle of the board I was trying to read facing me, looking me up and down asking my age and telling me we were the same age

Resolution: I ignored him.

Conflict: He carried on and followed me to the platform.

Resolution: Finally he walked away when I moved next to a group of people.

(Anna, complete narrative)

The exposition establishes ordinariness, which is disrupted by harassment. Anna's actions resolve the narrative arc, restoring equilibrium. As such, women's narratives also tell of the accomplishment of ordinariness. And, since women's actions feature as the climax, narrative makes them apparent, no matter how dramatic or mundane they might be.

Women's resistance stories may not be widely heard, when given the opportunity to tell a story, a picture of everyday resistance emerges. Although 16 percent of submissions simply describe harassment ('response not stated'), 84% of narratives complete the narrative arc, describing the harassment *and* what women did subsequently. In 13 percent, women describe themselves as not responding. This is discussed in more detail below. Quantitative analysis shows the extent to which narrative reveals women's self-defensive actions.

	<b>All narratives</b>	<b>Narratives describing responses</b>
Spoke or shouted to harasser	218(40%)	57
Walked/ran away/hid	70 (13%)	18
Called on others at the time (police, security, bystanders, Transport For London).	39 (7%)	10
Reported afterwards (police, Transport For London)	33 (6%)	-
Ignored	28 (5%)	7
Physical response (pushes, shoves)	29 (5%)	8
Took photograph or recorded number plate	14 (3%)	4
Non-verbal response (gestures or staring)	19 (3%)	5
Stated that they did not do anything No time/opportunity (19) Froze/shocked (15) Scared/felt helpless (10) Kept walking/ignored (9) Feared no one would believe them (6) Outnumbered (5) Miscellaneous (7)	71 (13%)	-
Response not stated.	90 (16%)	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>546 incidents</b>	<b>385 incidents.</b>

*Table 1: Responses to street harassment*

Hollaback never encourages or instructs women to speak or fight back. Nonetheless, narratives described a very wide range of responses. Women described speaking or shouting back, or walking or running away in just over half of all narratives. Furthermore, some called for assistance at the time, took a photograph or recorded the number plate of harassers. Physical responses were not commonly mentioned. These described women pushing or shoving back in response to being touched, groped or sexually assaulted (with only one exception). Like previous research, women's responses tend to 'match' the initial attack (Edwards et al. 2014; Ullman 1998). For example:

Two of them blocked my exit [from the underground train] and another put his arms around me and said, “You’re not getting off are you”? I was able to squirm free and pushed the guy backwards a few inches so he couldn’t grab me again. (Carolyn, excerpt)

Whilst the above was a fairly dramatic escape, women’s responses were often rather more quotidian. For example:

I made a sound of exasperation, rolled my eyes and walked off, sticking my headphones back in. (Beth, responding to verbal harassment on the street)

Thus, small everyday gestures can be considered a fairly common response. Beth’s actions send a clear message of disinterest and disengagement. Women described such actions as spontaneous and mostly unplanned. Walking away, ignoring and even pushing or shoving are, in Bourdieusian terms, part of women’s ‘feel for the game’. They may not look like self-defence, as conventionally told, yet they clearly intend to ‘deter an immanent assault, or resist an assault in progress’ as per Hollander’s definition of self-defence practice (2018: 2). As others have noted, legal definitions of self-defence (in England and Wales, and the USA) are premised on one man attacking another, hinging on the requirement to demonstrate an immanent, clear threat, and that escape was impossible (Lloyd 1995; McCaughey 1997). When street harassment is seen as trivial, it is hard to imagine women’s actions as self-defence. But, if we consider street harassment as ‘everyday’ violence, we can better see women’s responses as self-defence. Women’s responses are everyday in two particular ways. Firstly, they employed everyday actions, described above. Secondly, as the narrative arc



emphasises, women's actions sought to reinstate ordinariness. Women's narratives reveal that safety (Fileborn 2016) like everyday life (Highmore 2010) is made to happen.

So far, I have 'read' narratives for content, analysing what is described. As *testimonio*, replete with careful and detailed description this kind of analysis feels apt. Quantitative content analysis usefully summarises this large story archive. Hollaback narratives reveal a high rate of 'proactive' responses. This is not restricted to Hollaback, however. A nationally representative survey of the general public undertaken by Stop Street Harassment in the USA found that 53 percent of female respondents reported a 'proactive' response to street harassment, most commonly telling a harasser to stop or back off (31 percent) (2014, 24). 14 percent of women had responded physically and 6 percent of women had asked for help from others (Stop Street Harassment 2014, 24). Given that Hollaback is a self-selecting sample, it is perhaps unsurprising that high rates of self-defence are reported. However, this data collectively call into question the dominant narrative: that women do not (and should not) defend themselves (Hollander 2009).

Interestingly, analysis of Hollaback narratives sheds light on a much wider range of strategies than existing typologies account for. The Stop Street Harassment survey did not 'count' ignoring, non-verbal gestures or walking away (2014). Given that such actions can be intentional and often impactful, they merit counting. Nonetheless ignoring and walking away are not easy to quantify. In some narratives, women describe walking away as *not taking action*, and I have faithfully coded it as such. This was also the case with ignoring. There is an important methodological point here: much depends on how researchers elicit and code women's responses. Nonetheless, perhaps the extent to which women defend themselves is not as important as recognising that women clearly *do*.

## STORIES THAT MOTIVATE

Hollaback narratives do not only describe everyday self-defence, but are a resource for collective resistance to street harassment. Developing Wånggren's (2016) claim that Hollaback narratives are pedagogic, the following examines how stories come to motivate women's responses to street harassment. Hollaback comprises an important counter-narrative demonstrating compellingly that women can and do fight back, challenging dominant discourses that leave little space to recognise women's successful resistance (Cermele 2010; Hollander 2009; Wise and Stanley 1987).

Women described reading resistance accounts as a way to learn strategies:

I had made up my mind about such situations quite a while ago and am usually not frightened to...well... hollaback. I remembered possible reactions to this kind of behaviour as I had read a lot of articles about it and therefore didn't need time to think about an answer. (Emma, excerpt)

I was riding my bike passed a car repair garage when a guy cat-called me. I had recently heard an awesome poem about a woman who barked back at people who cat called so I did it and it felt sooo good! (Karen, complete narrative).

Reading self-defence stories enabled Emma and Karen to conceive of and enact a particular resistance 'storyline'. This is only part of the picture, however and I would suggest that something deeper is happening. By reading stories, women may cultivate narrative dispositions toward self-defence practices. This is an active process; women described seeking out Hollaback, often after experiencing street harassment. Seeking out stories can be

a way to re-frame or reinterpret experience, but also seems to be about trying to enact a different story next time. For example, women often described replaying events and imagining how they could have responded differently (Davis 1994; Wade 1997). This process is narrative: it involves re-working the story, imagining alternative plots, dialogue and endings:

...The event made me so angry that I went home *and thought about what I should/could have said* and I came up with a line that has come in handy many times since then: “Perhaps you should try the lonely hearts column/internet dating instead, cause it’ll work better!” That gives me back the power and makes the harrasser’s mates laugh at him. Works for me. (Mena, excerpt, my emphasis)

Being a victim of street harassment was often reported as humiliating and upsetting, and reimagining the scenario is arguably a form of mental resistance (Jordan 2005; Wade 1997). Imaginative replaying may also develop self-defence dispositions. Winlow and Hall describe violent men ‘stewing’ on victimisation (2009: 295) imaginatively replaying events and then, in practice, retaliating to perceived attacks (2009). Drawing on psycho-social theory, they interpret victimisation as a threat to self-identity that can be recuperated through violence. They argue that this rumination enforces the habitus, priming men for violence.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, Mena’s replay enables her to recuperate a sense of agency, and is where she writes her own witty comeback, one that chimes with her own particular sense of a good ‘line’. But although Mena can imagine a witty comeback, it is another thing to deliver it in the heat of the moment. Reading narratives, and imaginatively rehearsing them, arguably inculcates dispositions that enabled women to make sense of *and* respond to street harassment. This is an active and creative process: it more than learning a stock response.

Furthermore, as some women's narratives hinted at, speaking back – once begun – could begin to become habit.

Successful interventions were described (and celebrated) on Hollaback (see Karen, above), including men walking away or being silenced. Some men even responded apologetically. However, having responded actively was perhaps more important than its impact. As one respondent stated: 'Even if he does not change, it changed a lot for me.' Whilst storytelling allows women to restore a sense of agency by reclaiming subjectivity (Cahill 2009; Dimond et al. 2013; Fileborn 2018; Jordan 2005), Hollaback also enabled women to re-imagine and enact resistance narratives. Narratives develop dispositions for resisting street harassment, through narrative frames of apperception, discussed next.

## **Satire**

Although *testimonio* was a dominant narrative style, satire was often used (see Karen and Mena's response above). Satire is an everyday aesthetic (Highmore 2010) that may motivate resistance. Presser argues that some narratives hold an irresistible emotional and aesthetic draw, enabling actors to break social norms (2018). Writing about narratives about domestic violence, Polletta notes that women used the genre of tragedy, offering limited possibilities for agency (2009). By contrast, satire offers women greater possibilities for action. As Frye states, satire 'stresses the humanity of its heroes, minimises the sense of ritual inevitability in tragedy, supplies social and psychological explanations for catastrophe and makes as much as possible of human misery seem... superfluous and evitable' (2002, 237).

Satire is one of four classic narrative genres, alongside comedy, romance and tragedy (Frye 2002). It is the most realistic, underpinned by a moral imperative to expose contemporary injustices (Highet 1972). In satirical monologue, the author is a morally righteous hero (Frye 2002). In contrast to a sober moralising tale, satire draws the reader in

through shock and surprise. Two features are central: humour and a sense of the grotesque (Frye 2002, 224). The satirist draws from an array of ‘weaponry’ including: vividness, colloquialism, and obscenity (Highet 1972, 18). Irony was especially apparent, enabling women to critique social codes of gender that render women objects of the male gaze (Vitis and Gilmour 2017). Here, Dana ironically narrates the trope that women dress to attract male attention:

Evidently something about me today makes me goddamn irresistible – maybe it’s the shabby biker boots, or the jeans, or the ill-matched oversized denim shirt. Hell, maybe it’s that I’ve brushed my hair and put on a bit of make-up. Or maybe it’s just because I’m a woman with the sheer bloody-mindedness to go out of my house... (Dana, excerpt)

Harassers were often narrated as grotesque, rendering them and their harassment absurd in an ironic reverse objectification (Vitis and Gilmour 2017):

...this squat tubby weird guy in his late thirties waddled across the road and kind of bared his teeth and leered at me as if I were a particularly well deep fried Mars Bar and gurgled some sentence sounding like “something something legs with me...?” (I’m not an expert in pervertese)... I then said loudly “ONE SECOND I’VE JUST PUKED IN MY MOUTH” to which a few of the people around me started laughing, and creepy wwithout eirdo slunk off. (Nadia, excerpt)

Grotesque characterisations undermined men’s supposed power and threat: a ‘squat tubby weird guy’ is barely worthy of respect, far less fear (see also Vitis and Gilmour 2017). As

Marcus proposes, 'we can refuse to treat it [the script of sexual violence] seriously, treat it as farce' (2013, 392). Satire can be misanthropic, but is fundamentally optimistic: humanity is flawed, but ultimately salvageable (Highet 1972). These are not monsters; change is possible. Women often stated that they hoped that men would 'think twice'<sup>3</sup> in the future.

Nadia (previous quote) also portrays herself as disgusting in her comeback; this is an ironic response to her objectification as a pair of legs. Likewise, Margery (below) described the most culturally abhorred distinctively female phenomenon she could think of in her riposte:

... I started to give a very grotesque graphic account of some of the details of what happens to us each month (I won't go into it here) but he soon looked horrified and stalked off with a curled lip... I'm laughing every time I think about it... I hope I made him feel as uncomfortable and gross as his victims. (Margery, excerpt)

Margery's satirical response parodies harassment: he objectifies her and she responds by narrating women's bodies as grotesque rather than beautiful. By seeking to invoke disgust, she seeks to carve out distance between herself and her harasser, pushing back his intrusion. Scatalogical humour undertook similar narrative work, with the added power to shock:

A group of men started cat-calling, and one of them shouted "Keep calm and sit on my face". Without skipping a beat, the most glorious retort came to me. I shouted back "Yeah, I will next time a need a s\*\*t". They shut up after that... (Nena, excerpt)

In satire, victimisation was not a foregone conclusion. Women were righteous moral actors and harassers were unworthy of fear. Whilst the above examples are notable as clear

examples of satire, irony and sarcasm were often present. Thus, satire opens up possibilities for self-defence and resistance to street harassment.

### **The limits of narratively motivated self-defence**

One in six narratives stated that they did not respond and most gave reasons. Just over a quarter said that they did not have the opportunity to respond (see Table 1). Street harassment is often ambiguous; sometimes it was unclear who the attacker was, especially on crowded public transport. Interestingly, this category included active and intentional self-protective responses such as walking away, even though women did not describe them in those terms. Some made a strategic choice not to respond, for example where they felt unsafe, were outnumbered, or in one instance saving energy for the remaining 24 miles of the marathon she was running.

Some described being stunned into silence:

...I was left with a blank space in my head. All the readings on assaults and verbal violence, readings of Hollaback stories and great “what would I do if this or that happens” scenarios evaporated from my head, leaving a black hole. (Olivia, excerpt)

Being stunned is a profoundly embodied reaction. Olivia captures how the physical sense of shock is accompanied by a halting internal monologue: body and narrative are intricately intertwined. Being stunned was typically experienced negatively, but it may be understood as a profoundly self-protective response, and of course women are under no obligation to respond. Narratives may foster dispositions for self-defence, but this process is an imperfect one, as Olivia makes clear.

We might question why some narratives get ‘under the skin’ (Frank 2010: 52). Habitus is durable (Bourdieu 1990), and arguably gendered socialisation generates dispositions that make self-defence challenging for many women. Women learn to use less than the full extent of their physical capacity, and to plead or beg, rather than to assert a right to space and respect (Lloyd 1995; McCaughey 1997; Young 1990). These dispositions may be durable, and not easily reshaped. Nonetheless, everyday gestures (such as walking away or ignoring) are perhaps more readily available. In Bourdieu’s terms, the habitus is transposable; dispositions generated in one field may be applied to another (1990: 53). Speaking back was the most common response (reflecting the high rate of verbal harassment) however speaking back may be more easily imagined, and more readily inculcated through readership and imaginative rumination on experiences of harassment.

The difficulty in mounting a physical defence is illustrated in Polly’s narrative of a very rare instance of violent retaliation:

A young man, probably about 20, came up to me smiling. I couldn’t help but meet his eye. He then grabbed my breast. I hung on to him, stopping him run away. He struggled but surprisingly my strength held him. My fist was ready to punch him but he had a wider reach and hit me in the face. My nose was smashed and my glasses broken. He ran away. I felt in so much shock that I didn’t report it to the police. Instead I went home and cried my eyes out. (Polly, excerpt)

Polly’s instinctive response is to hold on to her attacker and he reacts in an unexpectedly violent manner resulting in her injury. Nonetheless, her active response makes this a story worth telling. Fighting – win or lose – enacts a story of having done something. Telling the story positions her as the authoring subject of violence rather than merely its object.



However, Polly's passive verb construction conveys an odd sense of disembodiment: 'my fist was ready to punch him'. This recalls Allen's analysis of court reports relating to violent women in which objects seem to have more agency than women (1998). Polly's account speaks of two things: firstly it reflects widespread social and cultural discourses about the impossibility of women's successful self-defence. Secondly, although she has a disposition for self-defence this is not matched by a disposition for physical violence. As Iris Marion Young makes so clear, gender impacts profoundly in limiting women's bodily power (1990). And as Bruner says: 'a narrative cannot be realised save through particular embodiment' (1991: 7). Thus, while narratives may inspire resistance to street harassment, it is only possible within the limits proscribed by the habitus.

## CONCLUSION

The sociology of everyday life draws attention to that which is apparently inconsequential, highlighting the 'transgressive, sensual and incandescent qualities of everyday existence' (Gardiner 2000: 208). Street harassment is an everyday reality for many women, but arguably so is resistance. Just as the street may be a site of intimidation and restriction, 'on the street, individual believes herself to be freest to practice turnabouts, to fight fire with, if need be, even more fire' (Gardner 1995: 50). This is not to deny the impact of street harassment, but to recognise that: 'if the everyday remains a primary site of the enforcement of injustice, it remains a place for hope and resistance too' (Ferrell et al. 2015, 89). Activism may involve collective action and campaigning, but it may also be 'embedded in ordinary ways of being' (Pink 2012: 14). This article has examined how these two dimensions of resistance (Kelly 1998) may be connected, and mutually reinforcing.

Analysis of 528 narratives drawn from Hollaback London reveals women's diverse responses to street harassment. Resistance stories may be hard for women to tell (Cermele 2010) but Hollaback offers a place to tell of both harassment and resistance. Through their narrative structure, Hollaback stories highlight an array of strategies such as speaking back, ignoring and walking away, as well as 'small' gestures and actions which prior research has rarely attended to. Women's responses may not fit culturally dominant notions of self-defence but they undoubtedly aim to deter or interrupt street harassment, as per Hollander's definition of self-defence practice (2018). Whilst Hollaback is not representative, it nonetheless demonstrates that self-defence may be more common than previously recognised (see also Stop Street Harassment 2014). Furthermore, women's responses ought to be understood as *everyday* forms of self-defence: by using everyday, familiar gestures and actions, they seek to accomplish everydayness. In parallel with recent calls to recognise women's safety work (Vera-Gray 2018), my analysis suggests that we can do more to recognise women's self-defence practice. But, as Gardner states, 'to note and applaud women's strategies should not produce an apologia for the status quo. I discuss the resourcefulness of women, but the reader must remember that it is a resourcefulness that should not need to be employed at all' (Gardner 1995: 201). As Stanko (1990) and Vera-Gray (2018) have noticed, the labour of managing the risk of sexual violence is a heavy burden on women's everyday lives. So too is the burden of managing and defending against street harassment.

This research contends that activist counter-narratives on Hollaback enable women to undertake self-defence practices in their daily lives. Narratives are not only a way to make sense after the event and regain a sense of agency, but may be incorporated into the habitus as schemes of 'perception, conception and action' (Bourdieu 1990: 60). In contrast to dominant discourse about violence against women that tend to render men powerful and

women helpless, Hollaback narratives make space for imagining successful resistance. In particular, satire offers opportunities for agency, offering women not only scripts for resistance but also a style for speaking back.

Understanding women's self-defence practice entails recognising how bodies are implicated. As Smith eloquently states: 'we tell stories about, in, out of, and through our bodies' (2007: 395). The concept of narrative habitus attends to this complex relationship. Whilst resistance narratives may become embodied, this is an imperfect process. A desire to enact a resistance narrative may be mismatched with bodily dispositions, in short – the ability to shout, push back or fight back as if by instinct. In this sense, the historical *longue durée* of gendered inequality limits women's capacity to fight back. Nonetheless, by attending to women's stories, we can also see the 'small' but deeply significant ways in which gendered violence is resisted in everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst men also experience harassment in public it's quality and impact is quite distinct.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, they note that generations of working class men have been instructed 'not to take any shit' (2009, 288). Arguably such maxims are part and parcel of the narrative habitus, and part of violent dispositions (Fleetwood 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The wider impact of women's responses may be limited. As Hollander (2002) notes, women literally 'hear' each other's resistance stories but in a mixed audience, they are likely to be minimised or ignored. Likewise, given that women's speech is often devalued or trivialised (Weatherall 2005), women's verbal responses to street harassment may not be 'heard'. Long-standing notions of deviant women as 'mad, bad or sad' (Lloyd 1998) may allow women's actions to be readily dismissed.