

Understanding street harassment of children: identifying recurrent behaviours in a corpus of young people's accounts of harassment

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Background

This paper reports findings of a multidisciplinary pilot study investigating children's experiences of street harassment in England. Combining expertise in linguistics, psychology, social work, law and education, the project explores the nature, scale, and impact of children's experiences of harassment as self-reported via a bespoke web-based app. The term 'harassment' is used by the Crown Prosecution Service in England and Wales to refer to offences which 'cause alarm or distress' or 'put people in fear of violence', and although reported anecdotally, street harassment is not officially recorded in crime statistics for children (ONS, 2015). Similarly, while there has been research attention paid to 'stranger harassment' and sexual harassment of adults (e.g. Magley, 2002; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Hlavka, 2014), there is very little existing research which focuses on children as the targets of harassment. This paper, therefore, uses a corpus linguistic method to analyse the ways in which children describe the harassment they have experienced, identifying trends and patterns of incidents, and shedding light on how children perceive street harassment and the resources they have to cope with it.

Data collection and the corpus

A bespoke web-based app was designed to collect children's reports of street harassment incidents, which they could access from their computers, smart phones and tablets. Children were given a unique reference number to preserve anonymity but to allow for the follow-up of serious causes for concern. The app required respondents to select from a number of options for 'what happened', for example 'I was stared at', 'I was pushed/hit', 'I was beeped at with a car horn', and choose from a number of emotions to express how the event made them feel, such as 'nervous', 'afraid', 'proud' (adapted from Ebesutani et al., 2012). In addition, children were asked to select whether they were alone, in pairs or in a group and where they were when the incident(s) took place, as well as provide details of their age, gender and ethnicity. Following these closed-choice questions, children were invited to provide their own narrative account of what happened, as the app asked: 'If you would like to tell us more about what happened and how you felt, please use your own words to describe the incident'. It is these free-text comments that comprise the corpus data for this paper.

Data was collected from pupils from two schools in the East Midlands and one in London, following appropriate ethical approval. The children in this work are aged between 11 and 16 years of age, which is younger than previous research in harassment of young people (e.g. Swim et al., 2003). A total of 115 reports across the three schools were submitted. Of these, 61 included free text comments – 21

from boys, 38 from girls, and 2 from respondents who did not disclose their gender. These comments total 1,512 tokens, and an average of 27.2 tokens per comment. This is a very small corpus, even by 'specialised' or 'small' corpus standards (Flowerdew, 2004; Koester, 2010). Nevertheless, patterns emerge from the data, and while these patterns cannot be generalised as being representative of *all* harassment experienced by children, they provide important and useful insights into this under-researched social problem.

Method

The free-text comments were extracted from the reports and saved as plain text (.txt) files. The corpus was part-of-speech (POS) tagged using TagAnt (Anthony, 2015) which uses the 58-tag Tree Tagger Tag set. Tagging a small corpus for part-of-speech is useful because although the frequencies of individual lexical items are likely to be low, POS tags occur with much higher frequencies (e.g. Poole, 2016: 581), and provide a richer dataset for analysis. Given that the focus of this paper is on the behaviours and actions reported in the free-text comments, the starting point for analysis is those words tagged as verbs. There are 24 different tags for verbs in TagAnt (all of which begin with 'V'), and a wildcard query 'V*' was run in AntConc (Anthony, 2014) to identify all of the verbs in the corpus. There are 137 different verbs in the corpus, totalling 341 tokens. The 137 verbs were manually categorised according to different types of harassment behaviours to which they related. Like POS tagging, aggregating lexical items in semantic categories in this way allows us to identify frequency patterns that would not otherwise emerge (e.g. Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Potts, Bednarek and Caple, 2015).

Results

Most of the verbs which appear in the data belong to one of two kinds. On the one hand, we find verbs which children use to describe the harassment they experienced, and on the other children are describing their own actions, both before and after the incident took place. By analysing these verbs separately, we gain an insight into the types of harassment directed towards children, what they were doing when they were harassed, and how they responded.

Perpetrator's actions

In categorising the verbs that children attribute to others, six 'types' of harassment emerge from the reports (Table 1). The harassment type most commonly reported in the free-text comments are incidents involving people in cars beeping at the children, slowing down or stopping. These are closely followed by incidents with some verbal interaction between the harasser and the child. This often involves the child being called names and men initiating a dialogue with young girls, complimenting them and inviting them into their cars. Next are types of harassment that do not involve any verbal interaction, in which children are watched, stared at, and pictured/videoed by someone on a mobile phone, or smiled, waved or pointed at. In a small number of cases, children are followed, chased and even cornered by

Harassment type	Freq.	Verbs
Involving vehicle	29	<i>beeped, stopped, slowed, turned (around), drove, speeding, horned, honked, driving, cycled, curbed.</i>
Verbal interaction	25	<i>said, called, shouted, laughing, asked, whispered, told, shouting, say, lafed, convincing, calling.</i>
Being watched	15	<i>looked, stared, watching, took, videoing, papped, staring.</i>
Non-verbal interaction	12	<i>smiled, waved, stuck, shrugged, showed, pulling (faces), pointing, pointed, bullied, whistled.</i>
Being followed	9	<i>followed, follow, following, cornering, coming, chased.</i>
Physicality	5	<i>grabbed, yanked, threw, hit.</i>

Table 1. Categories of harassment expressed by verbs in the free-text reports

their harassers, while acts of physical aggression are relatively rarely reported by children. This quantification and categorisation provides us with some baseline statistics for the different types of harassment experienced by children as well as which types of harassment are most prevalent.

Children's actions

Not all verbs in the reports are attributed to harassers; we can also learn about what children were doing before and in response to incidents (Table 2). By far the most common verb that children assign to themselves is *walking* (n=16). A concordance analysis of *walking* shows the situations in which children most frequently report experiencing harassment – when they were walking to and from school, home, their friends' homes, or the shops (Figure 1).

Children's actions	Freq.	verbs
Before	28	<i>walking, going, sitting, waiting, riding, left, leave, crossed, talking.</i>
Response	26	<i>ran, walked, moved, went, run, move, lost, cycling, covered, said, shouted, call, spoke, reported, rang.</i>

Table 2. Children's actions before the harassment incident and in response to it

application form to move school <rep24>we were walking an two men looked at me and my friend then he took a
 and a car was beep I was scared <rep15>we was walking back and someone papped at us and said fuck off you
 she had a skirt on - legs showing! <rep50>I was walking down a alley way with a friend as we were walking out
 and kath and stared at us in a wired way <rep12> walking from school and we went in front of a park car some no
 entered and lated and drove way <rep17>I was walking from the shops on my own and two black men were in
 in at us and drove of laughing <rep56>We was walking home and pass a car and got beeped at <rep57> Whe
) and every time is the same <rep33>well I was walking home from school on my own minding my own busine
 uncomfortable <rep51>Once around 6:00pm, I was walking home my friend because they live on the same street, t
 lking down a alley way with a friend as we were walking out we got beeped at it made me feel quite uncomfort
 ed at <rep57>When me and my best mate was walking some man in a car went by us, turned around and carr
 .It was 5am and I was going to France and I was walking the vehicle slowed down to my speed and he asked me
 ice but a week - later they moved <rep52>I was walking to my friends house and I got horned at and I looked a
 together <rep38>just lad banter <rep39>I was walking to my mates with my bestfriend and this car beeped at
 ars and that got me realy pissed of <rep8>I was walking to school and out of my bag and some man grabbed it
 t they would take me <rep11>Me and Kath was walking to school and a man in the car beeped at me and kath
 in and stuck his middle finger up <rep32>I was walking to the shop and two men were in a car that had stoppe

Figure 1. Concordance lines for *walking*.

Finally, the children also reported the ways in which they coped with or responded to harassment (Figure 2). Most often, they took passive or evasive action, including running, moving or walking away, which is line with existing research on women's coping strategies for stranger harassment (Saunders et al., 2016). However, in addition to these passive strategies, children also report taking more active measures, including confronting their harassers, telling their parents and, in a very small number of cases, informing the police. These active strategies align with some of the response types less frequently employed by adults in response to harassment (e.g. Gruber, 1989; Magley, 2002).

ed so I was frightened they stopped the car after I ran around a corner so they couldn't see me after they went I ra
 ad to get his things and he started to follow us we ran away and we lost him <rep26> I was riding my bike when I
 went he would go where we where so then i had to call my mom to pick me up <rep22> I was annoyed and confus
 id tried to calm him down. My mom was going to call the police but a week - later they moved <rep52> I was wal
 ile took out his camera and started videoing us we covered our faces and moved the reported his actions <rep3> I
 a corner so they couldn't see me after they went I ran home <rep18> a mixed raced women on a bike was behind
 ate said 'why' and he said your beautiful so then I rang my mum and we tried runnig away
 I videoing us we covered our faces and moved the reported his actions <rep3> People was pointing at me and my
 :r. He said to me he wanted to keep me 'safe' I had said no 3times and he shrugge as it it was my fault like i was lo
 w us in his car. He said 'How old are you' my mate said 'why' and he said your beautiful so then I rang my mum ar
 ing. My mum heard, came outside and got me in. I shouted to my friend to run in home and the boy turned around
 s and yanked my hair and said its girls like these! I spoke to my neighbour who is a police officer but we would ide
 id feel the man started showingt and running so I ran to my best friends house and his dad took me to get my biki
 a car stopped and papped by a man in a car so we walked away <rep14> on the way back from school me and my
 y friend then he took a picture of us and when we walked past him and he akwardly smiled at us <rep25> I was i

Figure 2. Concordance lines showing passive and active action taken by children.

Implications

A linguistic analysis of this pilot data gives us the first insights into street harassment of children in England, as we begin to have an understanding of how children perceive harassment, the different kinds of harassment they experience and how common they are, and how children cope with harassing behaviours from others. These findings have formed the basis of guidance documents for the support of young victims of street harassment prepared for the British Transport Police and Hollaback London, part of a global network dedicated to raising awareness of harassment and developing strategies to prevent it. This pilot also forms the foundation of a study with a much larger scope, and reinforces the opportunities afforded to researchers across disciplines by small, specialised corpora and corpus methods of linguistic analysis.

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