

## Chapter 7

# Conclusions: Slowing Down

### Abstract

This chapter draws the book to a close by returning to the overarching goal of this book – to understand women’s experiences of sexual harassment on the London Underground. It brings together the key findings from each chapter. At its core, this book is about deepening and expanding our understanding of sexual harassment on public transport. However, by following the continuous thread of gendered mobilities, we can depart from expected lines of enquiry, broadening our focus to conjoin seemingly disparate conceptual and theoretical approaches and draw out the nuances of these experiences. So much is revealed through intimate observation of the seemingly mundane – an empty train carriage, the space between strangers, and the invisible rhythms that regulate and play out through our corporeal bodies. This is where we must look to further our enquiries and honour the complexity of these experiences. Along a similar vein, I hope this book demonstrates the continued need to offer space to women’s subjective and experiential stories as a form of rich empirical qualitative data, and how we must fight for the space and time to do this against the temporal latitudes of the neoliberal university.

*Keywords:* Sexual harassment; public transport; London Underground; rhythmanalysis; qualitative methods; neoliberal university

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**Mind the Gender Gap: A Mobilities Perspective of Sexual Harassment on the London Underground, 113–122**



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## **The Anatomy of Sexual Harassment on the London Underground**

The genesis of the idea for the research that constitutes this book grew out of my own experience of a strange man non-consensually rubbing his penis on my back just over a decade ago. Five years later, amid a research project about sexual harassment on public transport, I'm on the top deck of a London bus and a man masturbates at me in broad daylight. My reactions to both incidents left me with an unsettling curdling in my stomach – why didn't I fight back? Why did I just ignore them? Was I scared or confused? Why didn't I care more? Was I a bad feminist? Early on in my research I reached the conclusion that to reduce the mechanisms of sexual harassment on transport to simplistic, environmental (spatial) issues was not enough. This is not a situation that can be understood or fixed by lighting, CCTV, increased policing or crowd management. Similarly, whilst it goes without saying that I agree with work that posits sexual harassment on public transport as symptomatic of patriarchal and sexist social structures and unequal gender relations – I have little new to offer here in terms of theorisation, other than what has been previously summarised. It is a disheartening (and frightening) reality that men continue to harass and abuse women across socio-spatial contexts, and even more so, that this appears to continue without any clear sign of a positive trajectory. However, I hope that this book has at least achieved its primary and most basic aim – to explore, in depth, women's experiences of sexual harassment on the London Underground, and in doing so, demonstrate how the way it is perpetrated and experienced is impacted significantly by the context and space in which these incidents occur. To have a clearer, more nuanced understanding is vital if we are to combat such behaviours.

Transport, and the London Underground specifically, has gradually become recognised as a space where unwanted sexual attention is prolific, so far as being labelled as 'the ultimate hotbed of sexual harassment' (The Standard, 2022). Despite this, there has been scarce research that forensically explores how these incidents play out, and subsequently, theorisations to understand the phenomenon are transferred across from other spaces, assuming similarities and parallels. Yet my own visceral reactions to these experiences told me otherwise. Like many of the women I spoke to, my own reaction surprised me and was incongruent to my sense of self and my anticipated and practised response to sexual harassment in public space. But I also knew that my lack of overt reaction was not simply born out of fear. This was my first inkling that normative interpretations did not always apply to sexual harassment in this environment, and that doing so risked offering misguided and murky explanations.

Through women's in-depth stories, this book aimed to address this gap in knowledge, and illustrate the specificity of these experiences, in comparison to workplace settings, 'the streets' and other public spaces. A significant part of my argument is that these experiences are moulded by the fact that they are happening 'on the move', in a highly kinetic space where rhythms are dictated by seconds not minutes and are disciplined by the flow of capital in the city above. The Underground is a space of nomadism and transition where the social traits

of the public realm become compressed and altered in time and space. This book has allowed for an examination of women's mobilities in this liminal situ, showing how the freedom of movement between home, work and leisure continues to be challenged as they temporarily inhabit spaces of transition. The stories presented in this research then, construct the city and the Underground more specifically as a space of tension between freedom of movement, and frictions that are imposed by male travellers and urban tempos. Thus, a mobilities framework around space, time and rhythms has offered a new way of perceiving these intrusions.

The prelude, manifestation and impact of each incident are indeed unique, situated in women's broader urban biographies, yet there are commonalities that weave through these experiences and allow a discernment of the particularities of sexual harassment in a public transport environment. In conversations with women, I often heard my own internal dialogues refracted back at me, and listened to women from disparate backgrounds, with varying experiences, conceptualising and making sense of them in similar ways. I anticipated hearing moderated versions of dominant scripts of sexual harassment – particularly that of the incidents evoking heightened levels of fear and vulnerability – both at the time and subsequently. However, this was quite simply not the case. I initially struggled to avoid partaking in a process of apperception – viewing women's stories through the lens of a presupposed narrative and moulding them to fit my expectations. Indeed, it was very tempting to give more credence and weight to the more invasive incidents, and to the women who had more 'overt' reactions. This, I thought, really shows the impact that sexual harassment has, and justifies its attention. However, this would, of course, dilute the complexity and nuance of these experiences and convolute women's reactions to them. So, with the help of rhythm-analysis, I slowly defamiliarised myself (and hopefully you, as the reader) with how sexual harassment happens and is reacted to on the London Underground. By granularly exploring how women understand these intrusions and allowing space for not just fear, but also anger, confusion, embarrassment and apathy, we can reweave a more nuanced and honest story of journeys of sexual harassment on the London Underground.

## Before

In this chapter, we saw women's accounts of everyday life *moving* around London and participating in the rhythmic ensemble of the city. It demonstrated how the city remains a gendered environment that induces both fear and freedom and contextualised the (physical and mental) landscape in which incidents of sexual harassment occur. By using the conceptual character of the flâneur to analyse women's experiences of everyday life in London and of using the Underground, these accounts revealed how the rhythms and sociabilities of the city and the Underground specifically, permitted pleasure, anonymity and freedom, yet concurrently acted to induce isolation and fear. The tensions that exist for women in urban space manifest in relation to the pervasive risk of sexual harassment, which acts as reminder to an underlying apprehension and a need to assess and negotiate one's presence and safety in urban space. However, looking at this through

the lens of the flâneur challenges discourses that only express the danger, fear and victimisation that women experience in urban space. Whilst these elements are present, we must not ignore women's complex and practiced negotiations of the multitudinous aspects of urban life that they embody and enact in order to be active, free and if desired, anonymous participants in the city. This chapter showed how the rhythmic attributes of the city and the Underground impacted on women's everyday urban experiences, both permitting them the anonymity to engage in aspects of flânerie, whilst also inducing feelings of stress and isolation. It also demonstrated how the perceived risk and anticipation of sexual violence in public space both contributed to and disrupted their normative rhythms and feelings of freedom in the city, an experience that they recognised as being strongly gendered. This chapter then acted to extend our knowledge of the gendered nature of moving through urban space, and also 'set the scene' for the broader physical, social and psychological landscape in which women experience sexual harassment on the Tube.

## **During**

One of the core contributions of this book is that it has uncovered particularities in the ways in which sexual harassment manifests and is experienced within a transport environment.

The fast-paced rhythms of the city and the sociabilities they induce are just as, if not more, impactful than fear responses. Whilst feminist work has highlighted how sexual harassment happens differently across contexts including the workplace, educational settings and public space (Madan & Nalla, 2016), and mobilities literature has uncovered general behaviours that are specific to transport (Bissell, 2010, 2018; Urry, 2007), connecting these two bodies of work and taking a spatio-temporal approach via the concepts of rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004) and friction (Cresswell, 2010) has allowed conceptual observations to be made as to how sexual harassment manifests and is experienced by women in a public transport environment. Firstly, sexual harassment is shaped by the rhythms of the city that permeate the Underground: the rush hours, lulls and night time, which facilitate and conceal harassment. Secondly, the etiquette and sociabilities on the network, shaped by rhythms, mean that women are often unwilling or anxious about 'making a scene' in an enclosed public space and do not want to disrupt their own urban rhythms and codes of comportment. Thirdly, the transitory nature of the space of the Underground is important, as women often envisage the situation as temporary and act accordingly. The ephemeral nature of the Tube also allows the perpetrator to disappear quickly. Essentially, using a mobilities framework connected incidents of sexual harassment to general time-space structures of the city and the transport network, illustrating how the various rhythms come together to produce a circumstance where particular incidents of harassment are perpetrated. The framework illustrates how harassment is, in part, a spatio-temporal issue, facilitated or hindered by the specific spaces, paces and times of the city. These findings contribute to feminist work that has focussed on how sexual harassment is perpetrated and experienced across contexts, addressing the gap that

has existed around public transport environments. It highlights that whilst there are similarities across contexts (e.g. sexual harassment on the streets and in transit is committed by men who are strangers to the victim), there are discerning features that are particular to the transport environment.

## After

This chapter provided insight into the impact of sexual harassment and how women negotiate the memories of these experiences over time. When considering the impact of various forms of sexual violence, feminist work has commonly focussed on increased levels of fear (Keane, 1998; Pain, 1991; Stanko, 1995; Warr, 1985). This is also true for work that has looked specifically at the impact of sexual harassment in public space (Gardner, 1995; Kearn, 2010). The findings presented in this book then, permit a move beyond discussing women's access, fear and vulnerability and allow an examination of how sexual harassment in public space is also negotiated and resisted, and how the experiences or memories are also suppressed and act to embolden women. Many of the women whose stories were shared here *did* experience feelings of fear and vulnerability (both at the time of the incident and over time) yet they made active negotiations to resist the impact of sexual harassment on their mobilities. These negotiations were varied, including trying to think as little about the incident as possible; reporting incidents of sexual harassment to authorities; shouting back at harassers in the future in order to claim back ownership of space; and demanding personal space when travelling on the Underground. In contrast, some of the women who did not have an overt response were not 'frozen' out of fear, but seemed to take an apathetic or resigned approach, framing their experiences as 'not a big deal', or 'just one of many'. This chapter, therefore, has contributed to a body of feminist literature that aims to understand fear of violence by taking into account structures of power alongside individual's agency (Koskela, 1997; Mehta & Bondi, 1999). This does not detract from the fact that sexual harassment is experienced as highly intrusive and disruptive (across time) to women's mobilities. Rather it demonstrates women's resistance and ambivalence to the impact of sexual harassment existing alongside, or without fear.

This chapter also demonstrated that the impact sexual harassment has on an individual is not static and unchanging. The concepts of memory, rhythm and friction demonstrated the temporal experience of sexual harassment and how it changes across time and space. By taking this approach, we have explored how the impact on mobility is multi-layered, and spatially and temporally implicated, revealing how sexual harassment forces women to constantly renegotiate their relationship with the city. It is more nuanced than the binaries of being passive and active, disempowered or empowered. The analysis of these women's experiences of sexual harassment and their impact over time shows that there are latitudes between the two. It has shown how not simply focussing on female fear of victimisation can do justice to these negotiations that women incorporate into their lives in order to reduce disruption to their pleasure and freedom in public space. This is a significant contribution to work within the realm of

feminist geography that focusses on how women experience and negotiate the city in a gendered way, particularly after experiencing an incident of sexual harassment (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009). Using the concept of memory has also highlighted how the incident of harassment itself is remembered differently as time passes. Incidents of sexual harassment or assault can be redefined over time, based on the individual's life trajectory and societal context. The concept of memory then serves to show both the fluidity of the impact of sexual harassment and the fluidity of the memory itself.

### **The Value of a Mobilities Perspective**

This book offers a significant contribution to mobilities studies, a field of work that seeks to address the complexity and impact of social actions and encounters that happen on the move (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2000). Conversely, a mobilities perspective has been particularly pertinent for theorising experiences of sexual harassment that are happening in a transport environment: a moving space. The approach permitted an exploration of how the urban and transport rhythms coalesce and intertwine to shape and facilitate the perpetration of, women's experiences of, and responses to, sexual harassment. A mobilities perspective brings to the forefront how these experiences are shaped by the fact they are happening in a mobile environment. A core component of this approach was paying attention to the rhythms of the space, or in Lefebvre's words, rhythmanalysis. Significantly, an attentiveness to rhythms revealed the politics of pace on the network.

Lefebvre's (2004) rhythmanalysis has been employed to look at a multitude of aspects of everyday life in urban space and to explore various social inequalities (Reid-Musson, 2018; Schwanen et al., 2012). Yet to date there is little research that uses a rhythmanalysis perspective to explore gendered experiences or gender inequalities of everyday life in urban space. Lefebvre has been criticised for failing to acknowledge gender inequalities, spatialities and subjectivities in his work (Kipfer et al., 2012; Reid-Musson, 2018), or the non-neutral nature of rhythms. Yet these scholars have also recognised that 'Lefebvre's ideas hold for what might be loosely labelled intersectional research... that seeks to identify gender, sexuality, race and colonial categories of inequality and difference in order to undo them' (Reid-Musson, 2018, p. 885). For this research, rhythmanalysis has provided a framework through which to draw out new insights into the less perceptible aspects of gendered experiences of sexual harassment in a public urban space. The result of this is twofold. Firstly, it demonstrates how navigating city spaces is a highly gendered experience; something remains contested and negotiated. It shows that these negotiations are not solely fear driven, but also shaped by an insistence and resistance, to (re)claim and not be pushed out of public space [or what Koskela (1997) may term 'bold breakings']. Secondly, taking a rhythmanalysis perspective has also permitted a bridge between the corporeal bodily experience of sexual harassment and the role of the broader spatio-temporal dynamics, therefore contributing to feminist discussions regarding how women

experience and react to sexual violence in public spaces. It confronts taken for granted ideas of why women react a certain way to sexual harassment within these spaces – again challenging the notion that fear is the dominant regulator. I reiterate, that of course, these experiences of men’s intrusions can be fear inducing – that sometimes, they are in fact, terrifying and this fear is well justified. However, rhythmanalysis revealed to me that, alongside experiences of fear, there are other things at play, including confusion, anger, embarrassment and ambivalence. These emotions, themselves induced and shaped by external rhythms, coalesce to mitigate women’s responses to sexual harassment in a transport environment.

Something I did not anticipate was how some of the most dominant rhythms at play in shaping these experiences, were the relentless rhythms of capital. At first glance, these temporalities are far removed from the corporeal experience of an incident of sexual harassment, and indeed, they were not immediately articulated by the women I spoke to. However, by endeavouring to grasp and understand the ambivalence with which some of these experiences (including my own) were dealt with, it became clear that, in these moments of intrusion, we are both indelibly human, and simultaneously at the mercy of abstract (capitalist) time that shapes our physical and psycho-political responses. Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis has Marxist roots, so perhaps it is not surprising that, by using this approach to examine the invisible components of experiences of sexual harassment on the Underground, we reveal that it is connected to the temporalities of labour.

As we explored in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, the dominant pace of the Underground, and the behavioural norms it induces, act to enable the perpetration of sexual harassment and mitigate women’s responses. I address this by drawing on Baumgartner’s (1988) concept of ‘moral minimalism’. In the context of this form of social order, she claims that the least extreme reaction to an offence is preferable, and people shy away from exercising explicit social control against each other. This helps us to understand the tussle that often exists between women’s autonomy and agency – the desire to react in a way congruent to their sense of self, and the pull of invisible rhythms that force us to act at the bequest of capital by conforming to the temporal policies of the Tube, that encourage silence, and an avoidance of anything that disrupts the journey. In the physical-psycho-spatial nexus of the London Underground carriage, many commuters decidedly disassociate in order to subjectively speed up their journey. Consequently, there is significant disdain towards anything that disrupts this collective condition. Thus, the standardising temporality of the city breeds inertia and apathy in the face of sexual harassment ‘on the move’. The dominant temporalities in the space of the Underground reflect standardisation, discipline, surveillance and productivity as some of the most defining elements of our social world. In other words, the structure and perception of time on the Underground, that deeply impact incidents of sexual harassment, reflect the values of time in the city above. To ignore or marginalise the broader context in which these incidents occur is to offer a limited and partial perspective that restricts our understanding.



## **Final Thoughts – Knowing Sexual Harassment and the Rhythms of Academia**

At the core of this book, there are 29 stories derived from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women who had experienced sexual harassment on the London Underground. These were complemented by countless informal conversations, and my own experiences, observations, fieldnotes and reflexive journal entries, constituting overall in an ethnographic study that spanned across three years. I believe that it is this approach that led to the subtlety of these stories to be rendered conspicuous and permit important new insights into this phenomenon. As such, I want to take the time to reflect on the value of slow and (at times) messy methodologies, and frame them as a positive and important force of friction against the temporal latitudes of neoliberal academia.

In the introductory chapter of this book, I noted how much of the work that has focussed on sexual harassment on transport has been gathered using quantitative approaches and presented in numerical form to offer a rapid assessment or a broad overview (Gekoski et al., 2015; Stringer, 2007). These studies are immensely valuable to assess the scope of the issue; however, through the lens of these methodologies, the complexity of the subjective experience can become simultaneously streamlined and fragmented as it travels from embodied experience, through academic research processes and bureaucracies, and is transformed into a numerical output. Furthermore, the role of context (social, spatial and temporal) in shaping these experiences is often neglected and obscured. As I hope I have illustrated throughout this book, these factors are paramount in understanding the nuance and broader context of these experiences. As such, qualitative methodologies, particularly ethnographic approaches, hold significant value as they take into account the wider social context, as well as offering insight into subjective interpretations, perceptions, beliefs and meanings that women attach to their experiences.

Yet this slow mode of discovery is at risk of becoming marginalised. Over recent decades, academics have documented and warned of the insidious rise of the neoliberal university and its damaging implications. Whereas the liberal university was characterised as a space for slow contemplation and critical thought, the dominant rhythms of contemporary, neoliberal academia are overtly fast paced, driven by commercialisation and marketisation, with a focus on increased performance that is ultimately measurable in economic terms (Troiani & Dutton, 2021). This has been conceptualised in terms of temporalities, and Shaw and Blazek (2023, p. 2) draw on Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis to explore the conflicting rhythms of academic life, arguing that the arrhythmic nature of higher education means it is doomed to a 'slow death' as 'rhythms of crisis-emergency-crisis suck life gradually out of the creativity and functionality of the sector'. Whilst Vostal (2015) argues that 'the fast lane' is not entirely negative, he acknowledges the seriousness of the adverse consequences of a relentless 'rush, hurry and intensified workload for the scholarly profession'. A negative consequence of this at a personal level is the increased pressure to perform, internalisation of a meritocratic ideology and a subsequent mutation of the academic self, and possible burn



out. In the gym of academic metrics [or what Beer (2016) terms ‘metric power’], publishing mantras, grant imperatives and Research Excellence Frameworks, we are stewarded onto a treadmill that sculpts our academic identities into apparatus through which the ideologies and priorities of the academy are performed. In this landscape, as the title of Menzies and Newson (2007) article suggests, academics are often left with ‘no time to think’.

This may seem like an unnecessary diversion at this point in the book; however, it is a dominant institutional *rhythm* that poses broader epistemological concerns. The academic ‘need for speed’ in the production of knowledge endangers the effective use of qualitative methodologies, and as such, our ability to form useful, impactful understandings of complex social issues. It has been well documented that, in the context described above, quantitative approaches are deemed more valuable due to their fast, ‘scientific’ outputs, with ‘real world’ application and economic benefits, in comparison to slow and ‘messy’ qualitative approaches. This implicates whose voices are heard, how they are amplified (or quashed) and how much time is taken to understand what is being said. In the context of this book, for example, I am adamant that the relatively slow and messy way in which knowledge was gathered led to the formation of a valuable conceptual framework, that I have argued throughout, offers a new perspective on sexual harassment on public transport. Long, muddled conversations over coffee and endless hours going nowhere in particular on the Tube, observing and ‘sensing’ the atmospheres and rhythms of the space, offered a wealth of complex and often contradictory data. I had time to read up on interesting, yet seemingly unconnected concepts, and I had space to laterally theorise and make sense of the data – rather than a time frame (or supervisor) nudging me to diminish its complexity. I contend that working to these unhurried rhythms permitted me to challenge, shift and strengthen our understandings of how sexual harassment is experienced on public transport.

If this slow mode of researching and ‘thinking’ is in jeopardy in the context of the university, then we risk participating in a process of misguided epistemological reductionism and theoretical apperception. By limiting the scope of methodologies academics are able to feasibly employ [whilst striving to be ‘world leading’ researchers, ‘excellent’ teachers and professional administrators (Feldman & Sandoval, 2018)], the complex, subjective knowledge of the experiences of (in this case) sexual harassment themselves become out of reach, pushed to the fringes of our consciousness, and remains known only at the individual corporeal and psychological level of the victim. This is hugely problematic, with very real implications – it is in this reductive and shallow ontological realm, that experiences that are part of a broader phenomenon become atomised, fragmented and individualised. And, it is from this limited and linear understanding, whether born out of naivete, ignorance or an active disavowal of anything too complex and systemic, that simplistic policies and practices are justified. In the context of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, we see this process rear its head in the amplification of shallow recommendations, for example, when we see perpetrators being framed as ‘bad apples’ and punished punitively, and women being victim blamed for taking risks and encouraged to engage in more safety work.

In this context, any broader social factors at play are misunderstood or neglected entirely.

The depth of what we ‘know’ of sexual harassment, who perpetrates it, and how victims experience and deal with the impact of these intrusions, should not be diminished at the mercy of institutional academic rhythms. There is a balance to be made between the demand for rapid results, and the need for nuanced understandings of complex social issues, but the power of the pace of a neo-liberal university first requires acknowledgement in order to enact some form of resistance. Menzies and Newson (2007, p. 83) urge academics to ‘champion temporal practices which allow time for the “deep presence” required for creative intellectual work. As an early career researcher, I am writing this, in part, as a reminder to myself to resist ‘unconscious submission’ (Clarke & Knights, 2015) to the rhythms of the university. As Lefebvre contends, rhythms have the power to reveal the politics of pace – and here, efficiency and speed perpetuate the inducement of moral minimalism across social spheres. Now more than ever, I contend that it is vital to slow down, and to feel and understand the rhythms of women’s complex and messy experiences of men’s intrusions in urban space. In order to carve out the opportunities to mobilise these often suppressed forms of knowledge, we must create our own rhythms, demand the time to listen, and the space to think!