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Apprehension of reproducing racialized stigmas in storytelling on street harassment in France: 'I feel I'd just be adding to the stereotype'

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Abstract

Online and offline spaces where victims shared their experiences with street harassment were instrumental in putting this issue on the political agenda around the world. However, one question in particular sparked uneasiness among French activists: how to deal with stories that, in their view, reproduced stigmas about racialized men or disadvantaged areas? Existing scholarship addresses how people avoid mentioning race so that they do not risk being labeled racist while engaging in covert racism. However, concepts such as covert racism, colorblindness, and white fragility fail to fully capture how activists managed these spaces or how victims shared their experiences. While activists discussed victims' race and class, they avoided doing so for perpetrators as they were concerned about stigmatization. To address this theoretical gap, this article elaborates a theory on the apprehension of reproducing stigmas. I conceptualize this moral emotion as an anxiety about reinforcing the stigmatization of categories of people whom an individual considers to be already stigmatized. This concept highlights how avoiding race does not always signal a 'colorblind' refusal of racial categories but may reflect morally informed anxieties. Beyond race, this apprehension can concern other subjects analyzed in stigma scholarship, such as poverty and mental illness. Based on content analysis of 532 stories, ethnography, and interviews, I analyze how victims structured their stories not solely based on what they sought to share, but also on the stigmas they wanted to avoid. A better understanding of apprehensions and their effects is important for research on individuals' reflective work to avoid stigmatization.

Keywords

race, social movements, stigma, storytelling, street harassment

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Introduction

At the Fête de l'Humanité festival outside Paris, the organization Stop harcèlement de rue ('Stop street harassment') has a stand where victims can share their experiences on a Post-It and adhere it to a wall. A volunteer addresses two young women:

We also have a map of Paris, and you can stick a thumbtack over the last place you were harassed. The idea is to show it doesn't happen only in poor neighborhoods, but everywhere. . .

The women look around for a moment and then walk toward the map.

'The last place where I was harassed,' one says. 'That was last week, here at Barbès.'¹ She picks up a thumbtack.

The other woman intervenes: 'Yeah, but that's not the idea, I think. . . You heard what she said, right? The idea is not to stigmatize neighborhoods.'

The first woman looks flustered. 'Ah yes, well. . . ' She stares pensively at the map. 'Actually, a couple of weeks ago I was harassed around here, near the Louvre, in les Halles.'²

'Ah yes, you could also put it there!' the other woman says.

'I'll put it there.'

Seemingly relieved by this alternative, the woman sticks a yellow thumbtack in the center of the map, just above the Seine (15 September 2018).

From the consciousness-raising sessions and speakouts of the 1960s to the #MeToo movement, sharing personal stories has always been a crucial component of feminist activism. In the 2010s, online and offline spaces where victims shared their experiences were instrumental in putting street harassment on the political agenda around the world (Desborough, 2018; Wanggren, 2016). These sites crystalized shared definitions of the problem (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023), which were picked up by the media and influenced reformers. However, as this vignette illustrates, deciding on which experiences could be shared has been a controversial topic. One question in particular sparked debates and uneasiness among French activists: how to deal with stories that, in their view, reproduced stigmas about Black or Muslim men or about disadvantaged areas? This concern was reinforced by the context in which these organizations raised awareness on street harassment, notably by the state strengthening criminal penalties and elected officials or media linking the problem to migration.

This vignette illustrates something that was recurrent in my study, namely that activists and victims sought to avoid referencing the class or race of harassers or the location of certain harassment incidents. Existing scholarship has addressed how people avoid mentioning race so that they do not risk being labeled racist while engaging in covert racism. Research on covert racism (Coates, 2011), colorblindness (Mueller, 2017), and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) analyzes how, because 'blatant racism' has become unacceptable in many contexts (Sears & Henry, 2003), people develop 'tactics' to avoid being labeled as racist by engaging in more 'socially acceptable' forms of racism that are

‘tacit’ (Rawls & Duck, 2020), ‘neo’ (Balibar, 2007), or ‘covert’ (Coates, 2011). Research on white fragility shows how white people’s discomfort about race prevents them from critically reflecting on their own prejudices (DiAngelo, 2018). Colorblindness – an ideology that is particularly prevalent in France (Cohen & Mazouz, 2021; Fassin, 2006) – is identified as enabling ignorance about race and silencing opposition to racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Mueller, 2017). It refers to a refusal to recognize how race structures opportunities and outcomes or to acknowledge racial categories as such (Beaman & Petts, 2020).

However, these concepts fail to fully capture how activists managed these spaces or how victims shared their experiences. While activists discussed victims’ race and class, they avoided doing so for perpetrators as they were concerned about reproducing racialized and class-based stigmas. To address this theoretical gap, this article elaborates a theory on the apprehension of reproducing stigmas. Drawing from scholarship on stigma (Lamont et al., 2018; Link & Phelan, 2001), I conceptualize this moral emotion (Goodwin et al., 2004) as an anxiety about reinforcing the stigmatization of categories of people whom an individual considers to be already stigmatized. This concept highlights how avoiding the subject of race does not always signal a ‘colorblind’ refusal of racial categories but may reflect morally informed anxieties about reproducing stigma. Because it is grounded in anxiety and triggers avoidance behavior, this apprehension is distinct from active anti-racism (Berman & Paradies, 2010; Lamont et al., 2018), although the two often go together. Moreover, apprehension of reproducing stigmas can also concern other subjects as identified in scholarship on stigma, such as poverty and mental illness.

I build on research on storytelling in social movements (Fileborn, 2016; Polletta et al., 2011) to analyze how this apprehension informed how people shared their street harassment experiences on online and offline platforms. The aim of my analysis is not to feed into conservative moral panics about ‘political correctness.’ What I observed during my fieldwork was not a prohibition of free speech, as radical-right pundits often claim in the context of debates about ‘wokeness.’ Rather, many actors expressed uneasiness and concern about the risk of stigmatizing minorities or underprivileged areas. These worries are understandable given the political climate in France and the fact that ‘street harassment’ emphasizes a form of sexual violence committed by men who spend more time in the streets (Gayet-Viaud & Dekker, 2021). Due to economic and racial inequalities, these men are often homeless or racialized individuals. Comprehending the effects of this apprehension enables an evenhanded evaluation of whether it leads to desirable consequences for activism and policy, or whether there may be ways of dealing with this uneasiness that are more beneficial to feminist and anti-racist politics.

The theory section consists of three parts, discussing scholarship on storytelling in social movements, stigma and race, and a theorization of apprehension of reproducing stigmas. Subsequently, I discuss the context, methods, and analysis of the study. This article is based on a content analysis of 532 stories shared in France on online and offline platforms, ethnographic observation of the platforms, and interviews with individuals sharing their experiences and members of facilitating organizations. The main data analysis section illustrates how the concept of apprehension can be applied empirically, and the conclusion discusses the political implications of this concept and its applicability to other contexts.

From victim's experiences to stories as social acts

Research on online sharing of street harassment experiences shows the therapeutic and health benefits it can have for victims (Dimond et al., 2013). Fileborn's work investigates people's reasons for engaging in social media activity and whether it fulfills victims' 'justice needs' (2016). Wanggren finds that sharing stories may impact behavior by, for instance, activating bystanders to intervene in cases of street harassment (2016). Based on an analysis of stories shared on the website of the anti-street harassment organization Hollaback! London, Fleetwood (2019) argues that sharing can generate dispositions for self-defense.

However, few look at how harassers have been presented in these stories. Instead of studying the impact of storytelling on victims' lives, this article builds on scholarship studying storytelling in social movements (Polletta et al., 2011) to analyze how the parameters and management of each platform encouraged victims to share some experiences while discouraging or prohibiting the sharing of others. Social movements mobilizing around issues such as child abuse (McGough, 1994) and domestic violence (Polletta, 2009) use storytelling to make personal troubles visible and shake up hegemonic views (Bamberg, 2007). Scholars conceive of online sharing platforms as sites of 'feminist resistance' (Fileborn, 2016) or 'counter-publics' (Salter, 2013) wherein alternative definitions of social problems emerge. While storytelling provides victims agency in allowing them to speak out, the stories they tell are always molded by the institutional context and power relations in which they are formulated (Scott, 1991). Victims of rape may be forced to tell their stories in a regulated manner to avoid being the victims of online trolling or 'negative witnessing' (Loney-Howes, 2018). Loseke (2001) shows how facilitators of American support groups for battered women encouraged speaking not about their partner's infidelity but their abuse.

Covert racism, colorblindness, and white fragility

The scene at the beginning of this article illustrates how worries about reproducing racial or spatial stigmas informed how victims shared street harassment experiences. Existing research primarily analyzes uneasiness about and avoidance of the subject of race by focusing on how it leads people to reinvent racism and marginalize those who challenge it. As blatant racism has become increasingly unacceptable (Sears & Henry, 2003), sociological analysis highlights how being more 'covert' or 'tacit' in expressing racist viewpoints enables people to claim plausible deniability, 'allowing them to deny responsibility and culpability while simultaneously undermining its victim's ability to claim damage(s)' (Coates, 2011, p. 2; Nowicka, 2018; Rawls & Duck, 2020). For Augoustinos and Every, 'Contemporary race talk . . . is strategically organized to deny racism. . . . Such denials not only attend to the positive self-presentation of the speaker but also allow what otherwise would be "unsayable" to be said' (2010, p. 251).

Colorblindness is a particularly powerful ideology enabling white ignorance about race and reinvention of racism in contexts where blatant racism is sanctioned (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). It leads people to provide nonracial explanations for enduring racial inequalities, thus allowing them to ignore how racism factors into decision-making and

professional opportunities (Mueller, 2017). Colorblind vocabularies are particularly prevalent in France (Fassin, 2006; Jaunait & Chauvin, 2012). The official Republican ideology of the French state is based on an abstract ideal of citizenship, an ideology that ‘means more than not seeing how race structures opportunities and outcomes; it also means not acknowledging racial and ethnic categories’ (Beaman & Petts, 2020, p. 1). In this context, race remains a controversial subject, even among left-wing activists (Cohen & Mazouz, 2021).

Research on ‘white fragility’ (Applebaum, 2017; DiAngelo, 2018) similarly highlights how discomfort about the subject of race leads people to unreflectively reproduce racism. Opposing the ‘dominant conceptualization of racism as individual acts of cruelty [according to which] only terrible people who consciously don’t like people of color can enact racism’ (2018, p. 123), DiAngelo’s study is influenced by Bourdieu’s work on habitus as a source of mostly unconscious reproductions of preconceptions. When someone raises the subject of race, this tends to result in ‘anger toward the trigger, shutting down and/or tuning out, indulgence in emotional incapacitation such as guilt or “hurt feelings,” [or] exiting’ (2018, p. 106). In explaining moments of uneasiness about race mostly in terms of ‘white solidarity,’ ‘obscuring racism,’ and ‘protecting white dominance’ (2018, p. 123), the main prism of DiAngelo’s analysis is strategic interest.

Without neglecting the major insights from scholarship on covert racism, colorblindness, and white fragility, these concepts have limits in that they analyze attitudes of discomfort and avoidance regarding race mainly in terms of the strategic reinvention of racism and ignorance about race. They do not fully capture the moral and emotional dimensions of people’s anxieties about reproducing racialized stigmas, and how avoiding race may be employed as a strategy to ‘resist stigma’ (Lamont et al., 2018; Scambler, 2018, p. 777).

Theorizing apprehension of reproducing stigmas

Avoidance behavior is most extensively studied in scholarship on blame avoidance. Building on Weaver’s (1986) pioneering work, studies show how social action is not only structured by people’s efforts to ‘claim credit,’ but also by attempts to avoid being blamed for having done something wrong (Hood, 2010; Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006). The notion of blame avoidance partly captures in which instances people avoided sharing stories that highlight the ethno-racial profile of harassers: when they render their racism more ‘covert’ to avoid accusations of socially unacceptable behavior. However, by reducing social action to the logic of instrumental strategy (Hinterleitner, 2017), an analysis through blame avoidance might suggest that avoiding stigmatization is always about avoiding backlash by being more subtle in expressing racism. Instead, as this article shows, addressing the issue of street harassment in a way that could stigmatize a population or area also felt morally wrong. I understood the uneasiness of activists and victims as an emotional state, a dimension not captured by ‘blame avoidance.’

I analyze this avoidance behavior using the term ‘apprehension,’ defined as wariness of the possible consequences of one’s actions, grounded in a concern for avoiding a collectively defined wrong. Apprehension often manifests as a concern for what others may do, beyond one’s own control, in response to something one does. Many French activists,

for example, avoided mentioning ethno-racial profiles of harassers to the media because they were apprehensive that the information might be picked up by right-wing parties to plead for stricter migration policies. Apprehensions are moral emotions as conceptualized by Goodwin et al. (2004, p. 422). In their view, moral emotions arise from complex understandings and moral awareness in connection to reflections about the world and one's place in it. Actors addressing the issue of street harassment expressed anxiety about repeating what they considered to be wrong ways of discussing or addressing social problems. They referred to their contemporaries and cited moral wrongs that they considered highly prevalent in the past and from which they wanted to differentiate themselves.

In my research on street harassment, I encountered different apprehensions, such as that of being politically correct (Dekker & Duyvendak, 2024) and of moralizing (Dekker, 2023). This article concentrates on the apprehension of reproducing stigmas, which I define by drawing from Link and Phelan's influential definition of stigma (2001, p. 367), as an *anxiety about reinforcing stigma of others by labelling, stereotyping, separating, discriminating, or otherwise contributing to their status loss*. Theoretically and in practice, all types of people can be considered as a likely victim of discrimination because of their group identity. This means that this apprehension can concern a variety of circumstances covered by the stigma literature, including mental illness (Tyler & Slater, 2018), poverty (Scambler, 2018; Shildrick, 2018), and place (Loyd & Bonds, 2018; Wacquant et al., 2014).

I use the term 'reinforcing' instead of 'producing' or 'creating' to emphasize how this apprehension is about repeating or reinforcing the stigmatization of categories of people whom an individual considers to be already stigmatized. Just as stigma itself, people's apprehension of reproducing stigmas cannot be fully understood through a purely situational or individual perspective. Indeed, recent scholarship has criticized the dominant understanding of stigma based on Goffman's symbolic interactionist framework as being ahistorical, individualist, and depoliticized (Tyler, 2018). A thorough understanding of stigma requires recognizing its social and political function as an instrument of oppression and state coercion (Link & Phelan, 2001; Tyler & Slater, 2018), as well as 'the causal role of social structures like class, command, gender, ethnicity and so on' (Scambler, 2018, p. 768). Similarly, whom people are most (or least) afraid of reproducing stigmas about differs between geographical and historical contexts, and is shaped by collective norms and representations, the power of specific social justice movements, and the oppression and silencing of minorities.

When this apprehension concerns race, I use the term 'racialized' instead of alternatives such as 'of color,' because it emphasizes how designating someone as 'racialized' is a process of social construction that at the same time has real social consequences (Barot & Bird, 2001; Gonzalez-Sobrinho & Goss, 2019). 'Racialized' (*'racisé.e'*) was also the term most frequently used by the French activists I studied. In this article, I refrain from making qualifications myself about whether someone is racialized. Instead, I employ this term only to indicate that actors in the field considered a specific person or group as racialized in Guillaumin's (1992) sense – that is, when they saw a person as likely to be a victim of discrimination because they are being assigned a minority-group identity. Among the French activists and victims I studied, apprehension of stigmatizing

racialized people mostly referred to people that the person in case designated as Muslim or Black.

The fact that, in specific national contexts, people's apprehension of reproducing stigmas mainly concerns particular populations shows that it is the product of collective histories (on which more below). Moreover, apprehensions are grounded in reflections about those histories. For this account of apprehensions as reflections about the past I draw on Stavo-Debaugé's work on *hantises*, a French term meaning dread or obsessive fear (2012). He observes how for many people in France, using ethnic categories is painful because it evokes usage by the collaborationist Vichy regime. Among the activists at the center of this article, mentioning the race of harassers evoked memories of how stereotypes of Muslim or Black men as perpetrators of rape have historically been and continue to be used to justify racist violence (Fassin, 2006; Stavo-Debaugé, 2012). Activists were apprehensive of perpetuating similar stereotypes, which were prevalent in popular imaginaries and media coverage of street harassment (Fogg-Davis, 2006; Gayet-Viaud & Dekker, 2021; Lieber, 2021).

Context and case description

Following media attention for the 2012 film *Femme de la rue* – which shows how the documentary's female director is harassed on the streets of Brussels – the Twitter hashtag #harcelementderue went viral. Inspired by this hashtag, French feminist organizations created several online spaces where victims could post about their experiences. Spaces created by Stop harcèlement de rue, Hollaback! France, as well as the Tumblr account Paye ta shnek ('Pay your cunt') received extensive media coverage. Hollaback! France disbanded after several years because it failed to maintain a stable organizing body. However, victims could still share experiences of harassment in France through the global Hollaback! website managed by the organization's headquarters in New York.

Multiple organizations also created opportunities for victims to share their experiences in offline spaces. At their stands at festivals and other gatherings, Stop harcèlement de rue, Osez le féminisme! ('Dare to be a feminist!'), and others encouraged passersby or meeting participants to jot down their street harassment experiences on a Post-It and stick it to a wall, creating a 'wall of shame' (*mur de la honte*). Often, there was also a map of the city where the event was taking place on which victims could put a thumbtack to indicate the spot they were last harassed. During 'chalkwalks,' activists asked passersby to write phrases on the sidewalk they heard while experiencing street harassment. Activists shared photos of chalkwalks and walls of shame on social media, and journalists frequently relayed specific stories from these spaces in articles. To understand why activists chose to manage these platforms in specific ways and avoid an overly individualized and ahistorical account of the activists' apprehension of reproducing stigmas (Scambler, 2018; Tyler, 2018), these activist initiatives must be situated within the broader politics of gender and race in contemporary France.

On the one hand, street harassment was politicized in a period of institutionalization of feminism in French policy, which was encouraged by a robust feminist movement (Jacquemart et al., 2020). Until the 1990s, the issue of race remained peripheral in French feminist movements (Delage, 2017), although they did refer to class to articulate worries

about stigmatizing specific populations. This is related to their Marxist orientation and longstanding relationship with left-wing political parties and social movements (Jaunait & Chauvin, 2012, p. 9), as well as a Republican ambivalence about the concept of race (Fassin, 2006). In the last three decades, however, French feminism partially overcame ambivalence about race and intersectionality became a popular term (Jaunait & Chauvin, 2012). Indeed, French activism on street harassment was not color-blind; activists even criticized the vocabulary of color-blindness for obstructing an intersectional account of victims' experiences. For instance, Stop harcèlement de rue's #LacheMoiLaVille ('Leave me the city') campaign contained posters that illustrated specific kinds of harassment directed at Black, Asian, and Muslim women. The organization sought to collaborate with anti-racist organizations and received statements of support from those working with women in disadvantaged areas of Paris (such as the Collectif Place aux femmes based in Aubervilliers).

On the other hand, these activists raised awareness on street harassment in a media and political landscape that often linked the issue to migration and disadvantaged neighborhoods. Marine Le Pen, president of the far-right party Rassemblement National, stated that 'The immense majority of street harassment is committed by immigrant men who import a culture that does not respect women' (Le Figaro, 2018). Valérie Pécresse, the president of the Paris metropolitan region for the conservative *Républicains* party, played an active role in drawing media attention to harassment committed by undocumented men in Paris's La Chapelle area, which is adjacent to the Barbès boulevard mentioned in the opening vignette of this article. Marlène Schiappa, the State secretary for equality between women and men responsible for the implementation of a 2018 national law criminalizing street harassment, framed street harassment as particularly salient in disadvantaged neighborhoods (notably La Chapelle). She directed police forces to concentrate on 'neighborhoods of republican reconquest,' meaning officially designated disadvantaged areas (Méréo, 2018).

The dominance of such racialized framings made organizations combating street harassment apprehensive of how their work could play into the hands of far-right parties. For example, Stop harcèlement de rue followed anti-racist organizations such as Lallab (2017) by publishing statements to oppose the criminalization of street harassment:

We fear that especially working-class neighborhoods will be targeted, even though the thousands of testimonies we receive prove that street harassment happens absolutely everywhere. Deploying more police forces in zones that are already stigmatized is dangerous given that relationships between the police and the population are already tense. (Stop harcèlement de rue, 2017)

Many activists recognized that by restricting their work to 'street harassment,' they concentrated attention on men who occupy urban spaces, among which lower-class men with limited financial means might be overrepresented. They tried to address this by presenting their work as addressing a broader problem of sexism, including at work or in politics. At the same time, activists contended that harassment in public spaces is not experienced in the same way as at work. Therefore, they argued, it requires different activist strategies and policy solutions. Spaces where victims could share experiences are

a strategic context to study the workings and effects of apprehension of reproducing stigmas – an emotion that was central to the politics of street harassment at large.

Data collection and analysis

I created a database of 532 street harassment stories that passersby and users shared through online and offline activist platforms. Most of these stories are short: between two and five sentences. For offline sharing spaces, I took pictures of 171 stories pasted on walls of shame at festivals and other events, and of 37 stories written down during chalkwalks. As for online spaces, I downloaded the whole *Paye ta shnek* Tumblr using the Tumblr API: <https://www.tumblr.com/docs/en/api/v2>. All posts were scraped using the *pytumblr* package for Python, and I selected the first 200 stories from this file. In addition, I copied all stories posted on the *Hollaback!*³ website in Paris (93) and on the Facebook page of *Stop harcèlement de rue* (31).

To study how these spaces were created and managed, I conducted 15 interviews with activists managing these spaces. They were mostly in their twenties, female or LGBTQIA+ people, and students or in possession of a university diploma. Ten of them identified as white, and the others as Black or Algerian-French. In addition, I observed 49 meetings held by these organizations, during which victims could share experiences, or during which activists discussed how to manage these spaces. I conducted 18 short interviews with people after they had shared an experience at chalkwalks and walls of shame, in which I asked what sharing this story meant for them and how they decided what to write down. Ten respondents self-identified as white, five as Black, two as Algerian-French, and one as Vietnamese-French. Both my interviews and observations focused on organizations based in Paris and its suburbs.

This article does not aim to give a representative overview of French activism against street harassment, but focuses on the main organizations that allowed people in France to share their experiences: *Stop harcèlement de rue*, *Hollaback!*, and *Paye ta shnek*. Important with respect to apprehensions is that members of anti-racist organizations and blogs (such as *Lallab* and *Bondy Blog*) made public statements about street harassment. For instance, they opposed its criminalization because of the risk of ethnic profiling. I interviewed representatives of these organizations, but as they did not systematically organize sharing spaces for victims they are not central to the data analysis section in this article.

All interviewees gave their consent for being quoted verbatim and were anonymized. The data were stored on a secure drive and no stories can be traced back to a specific person. Details on people's identity are not provided to protect their anonymity. Understanding how people's identity informs how they express and manage their apprehension is beyond the scope of this article, but an important question for future research nonetheless. Whiteness is primordial in shaping people's relationship to race (McDermott & Ferguson, 2022) and undoubtedly an important factor in shaping people's apprehensions. Worries about stigmatizing, however, were expressed by white and non-white respondents, which shows that apprehension is not only about whiteness and that the concept can be used to study people of all backgrounds.

All data were inductively coded using *Atlas.ti* to analyze the prevalence of different framings, recurring points of critique and tension, and the frequency of certain words and

expressions. The aim of the analysis was not to identify which harassment stories contain 'stigmatizing' narratives, but to capture the process of negotiation over whether something is stigmatizing or not and how this informed how people shared their experiences.

All interview, ethnography, and document data were in French and were translated at the moment of writing (meaning after the analysis) by the author, who is fluent in both French and English. As translation of some citations was tricky, the author worked with a professional editor-translator who is fluent in both French and English, who had access to the original citations in French.

The profile of perpetrators and location of harassment: Two uncomfortable subjects

The accumulation of stories enabled activists to show that victims were not alone, but suffered because of a structural problem (Fileborn, 2016). They hoped that reading these stories would allow victims to unburden themselves of the emotional weight of feeling responsible for what happened. However, while these actions were often positively received by the media and victims, hostile responses were common.

Passersby regularly accused activists of racism or classism. During a chalkwalk in the neighborhood of Pigalle,⁴ for example, a man walked up to activists and passersby who were writing down phrases. The man said: 'Isn't it racist, your actions? Women just complain when a Black man like me asks them how they're doing.' Like other activists I interviewed, those at Pigalle expressed considerable frustration about such reactions. One activist said:

The people accusing us of being *bobos*⁵ don't know us. On Vice [media news website], there was an article saying [we were] 'the new bourgeois women,' who just want to sip our drinks on a terrace in peace. Well yes, but no. (Interview with activist Stop harcèlement de rue)

Other remarks, by a woman who decided to leave Stop harcèlement de rue, illustrate how constant discussions of the risk of stigmatizing sometimes led to disengagement from the collective:

I'm fed up with this constant discussion of racism. I joined the group because I think street harassment is a problem. It happens to me all the time... These people say we're racist all the time... Or that we don't admit that it's mostly *banlieue* men. I'm so tired of this. I've decided to stop working on this issue, to do something else. (Discussion after General Assembly Stop harcèlement de rue, 7 December 2016)

The sensitivity of profiling harassers is illustrated by Paye ta shnek founder Anaïs Bourdet's short introduction to the organization's booklet, which consists of a selection of stories shared on Tumblr. The profile of harassers was the only issue its founder discussed in some details.

[Some] pretend that this indelicacy is the privilege of a particular profile of men or of a specific social class. Since August 2012, I have received and read thousands of testimonies, and here's the only affirmation I can offer: machismo is expressed everywhere, at any time, and by any kind of person. (Bourdet, 2014, p. 15)

At other points, passersby accused activists of not recognizing that the problem is about race. During a chalkwalk on 10 April 2016, I spoke with two Stop harcèlement de rue activists as they recounted what had just happened:

Activist (1): It often happens that racists use our message.

Activist (2): They say, 'Yes, you're racist.' Or just now, a guy told me, 'You know, it's always the Arabs.' When that happens, I always say, 'No, it's [people from] all social origins who harass.' And the guy reacted, 'No, but you're too nice. You shouldn't sugarcoat the problem.' So I said, 'No, but really, you can get harassed in the 16th by a white guy in a suit.' But it's exasperating that we're seen as though we're racists.

Bystander responses as these illustrate how pervasive racialized stereotypes about perpetrators of sexual violence are in contemporary France (Lieber, 2021). French activists were accused both of reproducing stigmas and of being politically correct. However, they expressed more concern about the former and emphasized the necessity of developing strategies of resistance to stigma (Scambler, 2018, p. 771; Tyler & Slater, 2018, p. 739). As a member of Stop harcèlement de rue stated during our interview, 'We really try to avoid being accused of contributing to stigmatization and right-wing politics. We're obliged to be very politically correct.'

Apprehension of reproducing stigmas was also central to activists' discussions concerning the use of maps to indicate where victims were harassed. Each time a person shared a street harassment experience on the Hollaback! website, for instance, they needed to identify its location on a map. When they did, a pink dot appeared and would turn from pink to green if the victim noted that bystanders came to their aid or were otherwise helpful. Hollaback! could be accessed anywhere in the world and other organizations, such as Harassmap (in Egypt) and Blank Noise (in India), employed similar mapping strategies. The Hollaback! application developers stressed the maps' power as a denunciation tool because they made visible how common an experience of harassment is. Hollaback!'s stated hope was that mapping stories would encourage bystanders to intervene.

Stop harcèlement de rue members, however, hesitated about asking victims to specify where they had been harassed. They criticized Hollaback!'s use of maps, and decided not to publicly endorse the website. 'When you look on [the] Hollaback! [website], it gives a horrible image of Paris. It doesn't help at all. It only increases the feeling of insecurity in areas that are already stigmatized,' said one organization member (General Assembly Stop harcèlement de rue, 4 November 2015).⁷ Using maps created the prospect of large numbers of dots clustering in specific underprivileged areas, thus reinforcing 'territorial stigmatization' (Tyler & Slater, 2018; Wacquant et al., 2014). The actions of these organizations were frequently covered by journalists who captured the walls and maps in photos, some of which subsequently appeared in the media. Activists feared that such visible clustering would reinforce existing spatial stigmas.

Nonetheless, they recognized that maps were an effective tool for making the problem visible and concrete because, in the activists' words, maps oblige people to see that harassment happens in places they pass every day. Some activists also argued that this information could be helpful for victims. In 2017, Stop harcèlement de rue started to incorporate interactive maps, which allowed victims to indicate where they had been

harassed, into most of their real-world events. Despite their desire to make the problem concrete, an apprehension of reproducing stigmas continued to concern many activists, who insisted that the aim of maps was to show that harassment happens everywhere. For them, the risks of reinforcing spatial and racial stigmas were closely interlinked, which echoes findings of recent research on territorial stigmatization and the racialization of space (Loyd & Bonds, 2018).

We want to counter the idea that it's certain areas or populations, which is completely false. There are different types of harassment related to the area and the population but, in the end, harassment is about sexism at all levels of society. (Interview with Stop harcèlement de rue member)⁸

These activists found themselves navigating a tension. On the one hand, they wanted to give victims space to speak out about their diversity of street harassment experiences, thus demonstrating the magnitude of the problem. On the other hand, allowing people to speak out created the risk that they might share stories contravening the common narrative of the problem and its causes precisely as activists were trying to establish.

Apprehension of reproducing stigmas at work

How activists and victims avoided reinforcing stigmas is what blame avoidance scholarship terms the 'strategy' (Hinterleitner, 2017) side of apprehensions. Despite differences in format, activists' feminist and anti-racist orientation produced a relatively similar approach to apprehension management in both online and offline platforms. Activists put great effort into making their work 'intersectional' by emphasizing street harassment victims' diversity. As for the perpetrator and location of harassment, however, they encouraged victims to be less concrete. Specifically, they encouraged them to refrain from mentioning ethno-racial identifiers of harassers or specifying a location if the harassment was committed in an area considered stigmatized or by a man considered to belong to a stigmatized population.

Analyzing the policy statements on the Hollaback! France website reveals a tension that many activists faced in their work. On the one hand, its policy on comments contained multiple rules intended to create a space in which victims' experiences were always treated as valid and, under no circumstances, questioned. On the other hand, users were asked to filter how they recounted their experiences, specifically by refraining from mentioning any of their harassers' identity signifiers.

Replacing sexism with racism is not a proper holla back. Ditto to classism, homophobia, transphobia, and the usage of any other identity signifier. In our experiences, harassment comes from people in every facet of our cultures and every strata of society. We ask that you refrain from referencing the attributes of your harasser because this movement is about changing societal values, not pointing fingers. (Hollaback!, 2017)

Notably, Hollaback! had an active policy of filtering posts. Before a post appeared on its website, it had to be approved by local site members. Hollaback! headquarters asked local site leaders to remove all information that might reveal a harasser's identity other

than their gender. Beyond my content analysis of the texts that appeared on websites, interviews with moderators provided insight into filtering. During our interview, a member of Hollaback! exemplified how these processes work.

Activist: We take out the racial and class identifiers. Today a guy was basically pinning street harassment on families that have too many male children, in Islamic countries, for example. That kind of thing would be taken out. In that way, we're steering away from those ideas... If someone says, 'I was jogging the other day, and two Moroccans were looking at me and whistling, and I got really scared and ran away,' even if they don't make a racial statement about what happened, just the fact that they're saying 'Moroccans' would be something we would take out because it's such a stereotype.

Author: Do you replace it with another word?

Activist: Just 'two guys.' They said, 'two Moroccan guys' and we make it 'two guys.' It's very clear on all of our websites. We all have an anti-discrimination policy that we're expected to put on our websites.

Street harassment activists influenced storytelling practices not only through prohibition and filtering, but also by expressing praise or disapproval of certain ways of sharing a story. As discussed in this article's opening vignette, activists presented these spaces as part of an effort to deconstruct the idea that street harassment is only committed by racialized men in underprivileged areas. Activists' discouragement of stories that they anticipated would be stigmatizing sometimes led to confrontations.

At Stop harcèlement de rue's stand at the 2018 Fête de l'Humanité, an activist talks to a young woman, explaining: 'The map of Paris is there to show that street harassment happens everywhere. There are many people who say it's a question of bad areas and racialized men. Our aim is also to show that that's not true.'

The woman responds: 'I don't think that's true. I live in the 15th.⁹ It hardly ever happens there. But when I go to meet my boyfriend, he lives at Stalingrad,¹⁰ it's just horrible. So, in my opinion, it's not the same everywhere.'

Activist: 'Well, but... We have testimonies about many different places.'

Woman: 'I always ask him to pick me up at the metro station. Otherwise, you get harassed the whole time, at least ten times between the metro and his house. It happens way more often there.'

Activist: 'Well, that's your experience of course.'

The woman looks somewhat angry, replying: 'Well... It's not my experience. Everyone knows it's bad there.'

Activist: 'I understand. But there are lots of stories about other places as well. And we try to be careful about that – it can be stigmatizing.'

Woman: 'Well, it's what I experience every day, but... Well...'

The young woman walks away from the stand.

Pressure to mold one's story according to social expectations may provoke resistance from victims. For example, Loseke (2001) highlights how victims of battering resist pressure by lawyers or social workers to recount their experience through a passive self-presentation or an emphasis on how violent it was. Sometimes, activists' anti-stigmatization approach provoked angry reactions from people who felt activists pushed back against their claims that they were harassed mostly by racialized men. However, angry reactions were reported infrequently. Far more often, activists' efforts to avoid stigmatization gave rise to a complex dynamic of reflexivity and adaptation among those sharing stories.

At the 2016 Solidays festival, a member of Stop harcèlement de rue speaks with a young woman.

'I'd like to write down something that happened to me a couple of weeks ago,' the woman says, 'This Black guy, in Villetaneuse – I was coming from Paris 13,¹¹ I study there – he said, "Hey, mademoiselle, that's a nice ass." [She writes down this first sentence on a Post-It.] I told him to leave me alone, but he kept walking beside me, saying things like. . . I think in Arabic. I told him again, [speaks louder] "Leave me alone." He started screaming "whore" at me, something in Arabic I didn't understand. I live near Alésia¹² and it hardly ever happens to me there, but when I go to Paris 13, it's terrible.'

Activist: 'I'm really sorry it happens to you all the time. [She pauses for a moment.] What we try to do with our actions is to counter this idea that it's mainly a problem in bad neighborhoods.'

Woman: 'Ah! Yes, well, of course I don't want to be stigmatizing. I mean, I just mentioned it because it happened so often to me in Villetaneuse. . .'

Activist: 'Yes, yes, I know. And we also have many testimonies of women who were harassed in La Défense¹³ by men in a suit with a briefcase. So. . . It can happen anywhere and [be committed] by any man.'

The woman starts to walk away, looking flustered: 'Yes, OK, mmmh. . .'

The activist, seemingly uncomfortable, moves after the woman: 'So, do you want to finish your Post-It?'

Woman: 'Yes, well. . . No, it's fine, I told you now. It's fine.'

It was often in subtle ways that people were discouraged from sharing stories that, in the activists' view, stigmatized minority communities or disadvantaged areas – sticking the thumbtack into the map next to the Louvre instead of at Barbès. While such discouragement sometimes provoked resistance, my findings confirm those of other researchers in that people generally ended up modifying their stories to fit expectations (Holstein & Miller, 1990; Loseke, 2001). Activists' presentation strategies (Hood, 2010) contributed to a production of stories that did not present the problem as being about the race of men who harass.

In numerous situations I observed, people sharing their story expressed apprehension of reproducing stigmas without activists' speaking to them about this risk. At the Fête de

l'Humanité festival in September 2018, a young woman walks up to Stop harcèlement de rue's stand and asks one of the activists about the map's purpose. Without mentioning anything else, the activist tells her she can stick a thumbtack over the spot where she was last harassed. The woman looks at the map for a long time, then speaks hesitantly:

I don't know if I want to. If I'm honest with myself, the last couple of times I was harassed. . . That was at La Chapelle and the Goutte d'Or.¹⁴ If I'm honest, it was there. But. . . if I put a thumbtack here [she points at the upper-right corner of the map], I just contribute to the idea that harassment happens mostly there. These are already stigmatized areas. . . I feel I'd just be adding to the stereotype.

The woman walks around a bit more, reading other people's testimonies. She then walks away from the stand.

One could argue that this woman did not refrain from putting a thumbtack over Goutte d'Or because of moral consideration, but simply because of extremely anticipatory blame avoidance (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006). Even if she did not run the immediate risk of being accused of stigmatizing, she anticipated the risk that such blame might fall upon her and strategically organized her discourse to be able to plausibly deny racism. This analysis conceives of actors' references to morality as opportunistic or illusory because their self-understanding ignores the 'real' mechanisms of their behavior. However, instead of this 'unconscious strategy' account, the perspective that I adopt by looking at apprehensions takes actors' references to or indexes of morality seriously.

While activists discouraged the specification of ethno-racial identifiers of perpetrators, they encouraged such specifications when it concerned victims. Women identifying as French Black, French Asian, or French Muslim recounted numerous stories of being victims of harassment at the intersection of sexism and racism, which activists encouraged them to share. One story shared through Paye ta shnek illustrates that it is vital to view street harassment as both a product of patriarchy and of colonization and racism – a point also emphasized by scholars (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023, p. 128):

In the space of a week, I'd been subjected to racist insults and public humiliation, while everyone stood laughing and no one moved. 'Hey monkey,' 'Are you going to be in The Lion King?'. . . Because of my frizzy air, I get all kinds of sexist remarks about Black women.

That activists encouraged discussion of race for victims but discouraged it for perpetrators is illustrated by the content analysis: of 532 stories I analyzed, 16 mentioned ethno-racial identifiers of the harasser; 61 mentioned that of the victim.¹⁵ Activists did not refuse to think about race in general, but were specifically apprehensive of stigmatizing demographics of men who already suffer from considerable discrimination.

Conclusion

Online and offline sharing spaces did not simply give visibility to personal experiences that 'precede' politicization; their setup and management influenced how victims presented what had happened to them. In other words, personal stories of street harassment were shaped by this process of politicization. Many victims structured their stories not

solely based on what they sought to share, but also on what they wanted to avoid: reproducing stigmas of racialized men or underprivileged areas.

The conceptualization of apprehension as a moral emotion captures something left largely unexplored in scholarship on stigma and race. Avoiding or downplaying race does not always signal a ‘colorblind’ refusal of racial categories or an attempt to be more ‘covert’ in one’s racism: it also reflects morally informed anxieties about reproducing stigma. Apprehension of reproducing stigma is a form of reflexivity about collective histories of racial, class-based, and other kinds of oppression. It guards actors against dynamics that might reproduce similar forms of oppression. Better understanding its manifestations and effects is therefore important for ongoing research on individuals’ reflective work to avoid stigmatization and racism. Beyond research on stigma and race, apprehensions allow for interesting angles relative to several bodies of scholarship.

The concept provides an innovative angle for scholarship on the ‘politics of masculinity’ (Kimmel, 2010). This article shows that we need a better understanding of apprehensions’ effects on how men are addressed in policies and activist initiatives on gender-based violence. Elsewhere, I show how concerns about stigmatizing led French policymakers – as French activists – to steer away from discussions about perpetrators’ identity: in campaigns, reformers represented harassers metaphorically, as aggressive animals or shadowy figures (Dekker, 2023). Beyond the subject of race, the concept is indeed transposable to all subjects covered in the stigma literature: these campaigns sought to avoid reproducing stigma about race, but also about class, space, and mental illness.

As regards the social movement and policy implementation literature, future research could investigate apprehensions’ effects, and how they are dependent on subject matters and contexts. Interesting research avenues would be to explore their role in decisions to stop publicizing the race of crime suspects in the context of Black Lives Matter, or their influence on feminists avoiding criminal justice solutions to sexual violence. Comparing apprehensions’ effects on political behavior to other factors such as frame alignment, political opportunities, and emotions such as guilt and anger would prove a useful contribution to the field. How – and how much – do they influence every stage of politicization processes?

Apprehensions are ubiquitous in the definition of public problems and in devising solutions to them. If the strategies we invest so much in are expected to bring about progressive social change, it is essential to understand these anxieties, their potentially harmful consequences, and the reflexivity they represent of our past and our present positions in the world.

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Notes

1. Barbès is a large boulevard located in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Paris. It is listed as a *quartier prioritaire*, a French administrative category for disadvantaged areas. References to poverty levels in this article are based on Bayardin et al. (2017) and provided to give a general impression to the reader. Victims and activists' remarks about specific areas are however based on their own subjective representations.
2. Les Halles is an area with low poverty levels in the center of Paris.
3. Hollaback! recently changed its name to Right to Be, but was still known as Hollaback! at the time of research.
4. A neighborhood with average poverty levels for Paris, situated just below the touristy area of Montmartre.
5. *Bobo* is a portmanteau of *bourgeois-bohème*, a derogatory designation for well-to-do left-wing people.
6. The 16th arrondissement is the second-most affluent neighborhood of France.
7. Hollaback's 2014 video *10 Hours of Walking in New York City as a Woman*, which used a hidden camera to film harassment in New York and contributed to the mediatization of street harassment in France, provoked similar controversy.
8. Delage observes how emphasizing that violence occurs 'in all social classes and cultures' is also a common strategy among French feminists working on domestic violence to avoid stigmatizing racialized men (2017, p. 179).
9. The 15th arrondissement is an affluent neighborhood with low poverty levels in the south of Paris.
10. A metro station situated in a *quartier prioritaire* with high poverty levels.
11. Paris 13 is a university in a suburb north of Paris with high poverty levels, categorized as a *quartier prioritaire*.
12. A relatively affluent area in the south of Paris with low poverty levels.
13. Paris's wealthy business district with low poverty levels.
14. Two adjacent *quartier prioritaire* areas in the north of Paris with high poverty levels.
15. It is impossible to provide a percentage of people who adapted their story since unexpressed thoughts are inaccessible to a researcher. My research, moreover, does not draw conclusions on whether certain types of men harass more than others. One might argue that some victims' feeling they are harassed more often by specific types of men results from stereotypes through which these victims categorize interactions; they might, for example, be more inclined to perceive as harassment an interaction with a man with a Black phenotype than an interaction with a man of a white phenotype (Fischer & Sprado, 2017).

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