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Chevalier, D.A.M.

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Close encounters with a third leg: Including fieldwork experiences of sexual harassment as research data

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Danielle Chevalier 

Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society, Leiden Law School, Leiden University, The Netherlands

Abstract

Sexual harassment experienced during ethnographic fieldwork plays an important role in power dynamics both in the research field and in the academic domain, but is marginalized in academic discourse. This article argues that experiences of sexual harassment during fieldwork should be considered as potentially relevant data and analyzed as such, going against the convention of the ‘malestream’ academic reference frame. The article demonstrates the possible relevance of such data, building on empirical fieldwork on the role law plays in social interactions in diverse public space, and connects to discussions on sexual harassment, embodied ethnography and academic positionality.

Keywords

ethnographic fieldwork, sexual harassment, academic positionality

Introduction: The silence on sexual harassment during fieldwork

“On a warm summer evening, in an obscure café-grillroom in a peripheral neighborhood of a small Dutch provincial city, I find myself in a somewhat tricky situation. The person I am conversing with has just informed me that I give a man three legs, and whilst my mind is still processing the meaning of this phrase, he crushes my body up against the bar with his body, his

Corresponding author:

Danielle Chevalier, Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society, Steenschuur 25, 2311 ES Leiden, P.O.Box 9500, Leiden 2300 RA, The Netherlands.

Email: d.a.m.chevalier@law.leidenuniv.nl

‘third leg’ clearly tangible. I am not a petite person, but this is a pretty big guy. The bar is familiar turf for me, it is a pivotal place in my fieldwork and I’ve already spent considerable time there. I register however that though the grillroom is half full, I don’t actually recognize anyone there at that particular moment. Apart from the two women behind the bar, I am the only female in the place, and no one present lets on that they are aware of what is going on. With the third leg firmly pressed up against me, I try to figure out how to best deal with the situation.”

Doing ethnography, I was taught as a student, is ‘the hallmark’ of the anthropological discipline (Spradley, 1980: 3). Moreover, participant observation is the core component of ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Working at the crossroads of law, anthropology and urban sociology, I use ethnographic methods to research the role law plays in urban dynamics, specifically focusing on social interactions and power contestations taking place in public space. Doing participant observation means being a participant to what you observe, and the participation can take on a very visceral and bodily stance. One example in case is the scene in the introductory vignette, describing an incident that took place in 2011, in the second year of my PhD fieldwork. This description is based on the fieldnotes I made at the time, on both the actual events and my immediate contemplations. Triggered by my own experiences in the field and subsequent reflection on these experiences I commenced a search for relevant literature. My quest however did not yield a rich return. Though sexual harassment in the field is suspected to be a common experience, the issue is ‘marginalized in methodological discussions and anthropological training’ (Kloß, 2017: 396) and its occurrence is not a consolidated ‘tale from the field’ (Hanson and Richards, 2017: 587).

As follow-up on a casual conversation between them about experiences of harassment in the field, Hanson and Richards (2017) interviewed over 50 female researchers on the topic. Reported experiences varied from sexual banter and frequent comments on physical appearance to physical assault and rape. Notably, though interviewees described encounters with sexual harassment as quite common, they often left out such experiences in the academic reports of the conducted research. Based on the results of their survey, Hanson and Richards identified three ‘fixations’ ingrained in ethnographic thinking: solitude, danger and intimacy. These ethnographic fixations, they argue, embody widely held standards by which ethnographic research is measured, and express deep-seated ideas on what ‘good’ ethnography encompasses. In an embellished representation: the fixations relate to the myth of the lone ethnographer, who in dangerous contexts builds intimate relations with the field and thus retrieves unique and valuable data. Hanson and Richards argue that these fixations are ‘ideological forms’ (2017: 588), that is to say subjective experiences of a dominant group that become the standard by which all members of a social group must navigate and evaluate their own experiences. Within the academic field, they contend, the dominant group whose experiences set the standards are white males; the experience of the white male body is taken as the neutral norm, through which ‘valid’ ethnographic data is gathered and ethnographic knowledge is obtained. However, they emphasize, in reality no body is neutral. The fixations ingrained in ethnographic thinking—conducting research in solitary, not turning away from danger and striving for intimacy—can specifically bring about situations in which researchers are

susceptible to sexual harassment and violence. As a consequence, the fixations both increase the possible exposure to harassment and at the same time constrict the academic space to discuss and process such experiences; sexual harassment encountered during fieldwork figures both in the dynamics of doing research and in the dynamics of reporting on research.

This article engages with both issues, expanding on the role that encounters with sexual harassment (can) have in data collection and analysis, and the subsequent sharing of that data. I illustrate my argument by sharing my own experiences. My aim is twofold: first to contribute to a still too limited body of literature on sexual harassment experienced by researchers in the field, to break the silence—or at least my silence—on this topic and to add to the shared tales from the field. The hope is that as these tales become more common place, it will become easier for others to share as well. The second objective is to pose a challenge to the assumption that sexual harassment during fieldwork belongs to the category of ‘awkward surplus’, that it is not a veritable source of data and not a profitable ground for analysis (Hanson and Richards, 2017). The central argument is that such a disregard is a loss for both individual research projects and for the collective ethnographic enterprise as a whole.

The outlay of this article is as follows: it starts with discussing the literature that informs my argument, delving into the term ‘sexual harassment’, the embodied facets of doing ethnography and positionality specifically in academia. Then follows the ethnographic research I conducted in shared spaces of everyday life, and my own encounters with sexual harassment. Subsequently I discuss what explicitly engaging with these experiences have meant for the analysis of my data, and what happened when I subsequently shared that analysis. I conclude with the argument that sexual harassment experienced during fieldwork should be treated as all field experiences; its relevance should be considered on content and not dismissed out of hand by a feared reception on the part of an academic ‘malestream’ reference frame (O’Brien, 1981, cited in Coffey, 1999). I moreover argue there is a real need to create academic space to discuss the dynamics around sexual harassment encountered when doing research, including the potential fall-out when bringing such experiences to the fore. I do not argue that sharing experiences of sexual harassment is imperative for all, but I do aspire that sharing such experiences becomes more common place.

Sexual harassment, ethnographic fieldwork and academic positionality

What exactly does the term sexual harassment refer to, how does the body figure in ethnographic fieldwork and what happens to academic positionality when one explicates encounters with sexual harassment in the research field?

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is not a new phenomenon, but its transition from a private problem to a social issue is relatively recent. Whereas its occurrence in public spaces has received

intermittent academic attention from the 1980s onwards, public awareness really started to take off from the 2000s onwards (for an overview see Dekker, 2021). Additionally, 2017 saw the light of #MeToo movement, sharing widespread experiences of sexual harassment (predominantly) in work settings. All in all, the issue of sexual harassment is nowadays firmly settled in public awareness and consequently feeds into longer running debates on what exactly it encompasses.

MacKinnon (2003), who has delved into the legal history of sexual harassment in the United States, argues on the basis of her research that sexual harassment is a reflection of larger social power structures and dynamics, not a 'private problem' of the individual encountering it. Schultz (1997, 2018) likewise considers power dynamics the central issue. She refutes what she calls the sexual desire-dominance paradigm that defines sexual harassment as top-down, male-to-female, unwanted sexual attentions. Sexual harassment is not primarily about securing sexual liaisons, Schultz argues, but about policing gender boundaries. Sexual harassment is gender-based hostility employed to punish the violation of gender norms, it is "more about gender-based put-downs than about sexual come-ons" (Soucek and Schultz, 2019: 234). This angle allows for understanding that sexual harassment is sexist, rather than sexual, and that it can target not merely females but everyone transgressing sex or gender stereotypes. Otherwise put, sexual harassment is based on sex but does not have to be explicitly sexual in content or motivation. Whereas popular conception of sexual harassment, certainly in the wake of the #metoo movement, defines it as male to female undesired sexual attention, legal definitions state that sexual harassment includes any conduct that demeans people of their sex or gender, regardless of whether it is sexual in nature (Schultz, 2018).

Kloß (2017) adds to the conversation from a fieldwork context. Based on her field experiences she too argues the deployment of sexual harassment as a power strategy and contends that sexual harassment entails 'reasserting and recreating masculine dominance,' and that 'the core of this behavior lies not in sexual attraction but modes of reinforcing (patriarchal) power' (Kloß, 2017: 399–400). Consequently, Kloß doesn't speak of sexual harassment, but instead uses the term 'sexualized harassment'. In the remainder of this article, this term 'sexualized harassment' is likewise used to keep focus on the fact that the harassment in question takes on a sexual form, but its primary goal is not sex. Sexualized harassment can be applied either to reinforce power imbalances or to disrupt power imbalances, but in both cases, it is a method to assert dominance.

Throughout this article I discuss incidents of sexualized harassment taking place in public space. The way sexualized harassment in public space regulates the access (for women) to public space and the related impact on the autonomy, feelings of safety, mobility, opportunities for economic activities and for political activities (i.e., being heard) of women in public space is not a new topic. Thompson (1994) already discussed this over 30 years ago and many have followed. Attention for the affiliated consequences for *doing* research in public spaces however is only recently starting to gain traction.

Building on my own particular experiences, this article articulates the subjects encountering sexualized harassment to be women researchers -but this appraisal requires nuancing in two ways. First of all, sexualized harassment does not only take place on the basis of (perceived) gender, but on all deviations from the 'standard' sexual constellation.

Otherwise put, the argument put forward here on the example of dynamics of male-to-female harassment can also apply when examining other forms of sexualized harassment. Secondly, understanding sexualized harassment as a mechanism to explicit difference, connects to the realization that gender is not the only factor on which social hierarchies are considered.

Scrutiny of the experience of sexualized harassment therefor requires an ‘intersectional’ lens, analyzing the issue from the multiple intersecting power relations at play (Crenshaw, 1990). In addition to the pivotal power axis operating at the intersection of race and gender (see Berry et al., 2017), characteristics such as skin color, age and physical ableness, but also socio-economic standing, legal status and cultural capital, play an important role in the social interactions that define power relations. Sexualized harassment uses sex as a leverage to address power dynamics in which gender is one of multiple factors at play. I reference the introductory vignette to illustrate this point: imagine me to be a Caucasian female in her late thirties with an expensive haircut, and my assailant a dark-skinned athletic male in his early twenties, dressed in very casual gear. Now, imagine my assailant to be a middle-aged well-to-do Caucasian male, and I a twenty-something dark-skinned athletic female wearing flip-flops. Though gender is a pivotal factor in both scenarios, the perception of the two situations diverges with the other issues at play.

To summarize, sexualized harassment is a mode of communication. It figures in the power dynamics involved in a social interaction between certain bodies that relate to each other in a gendered way. It can take on different forms and can be performed verbally or physically -or both. Though sexualized harassment is not necessarily expressed through physical demonstration, it is always physical in its messaging and directed at a certain body.

Ethnographic fieldwork

Multiple definitions exist on what the core component of ethnography, participant observation, precisely entails. I adhere to the appreciation that it is ‘the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting’ (Schensul et al., 1999: 91). This immersion in the activities of participants in their own setting offers the opportunity to observe dynamics taking place that informants might not be able or not be willing to share through interviews.

Collecting data through participant observation and analyzing such data is essentially an interpretative enterprise (Bryman, 2016), and the epistemological considerations inherent to such an enterprise form a key debate (Bourdieu, 1995). It is commonly acknowledged that the identity of a researcher interacts with the research experience and reflexivity, defined by Gouldner as understanding one’s “position in the social world” (1970: 489) is nowadays generally practiced.

Participant observation is as much a physical undertaking as it is a mental enterprise: participation entails bodily engagement (Okely, 2007). Indeed, the fact that the researcher is the research instrument in ethnographic fieldwork is often propagated as the merit of the method (Coffey, 1999: 3). The presence of the ethnographic self and subsequent

interaction with the field is a commonly acknowledged dynamic (Fine, 2003). 'Fieldwork is itself a 'social setting' inhabited by embodied, emotional physical selves' and it 'relies upon the interactions, relations and situatedness of the researcher and the researched' (Coffey, 1999: 7–8). The term 'embodied ethnography' (Turner, 2000) centers the bodily facet of doing ethnography, especially in the act of participant observation. At the same time, the ethnographic self in the research setting is often regarded as a nuisance to be contained as much as possible, all the more so when it concerns the embodied dimension of the self. It is therefore highly relevant to 'look beyond the body as fieldwork baggage and to locate it as central to the experience of doing ethnography' (Pole, 2007: 68). One should understand processes of fieldwork as 'practical, intellectual and emotional accomplishments' (Coffey, 1999: 2), encompassing 'inescapable corporeality and emotional vicissitudes' (Monaghan, 2004: 454). The bodily participation in a research context under observation entails that dynamics in the field are bodily absorbed (Turner, 2000).

The participatory stance of participant observation is argued to allow for a deeper and more holistic comprehension of the social dynamics under scrutiny than detached observations. Over time, the academic discussion on the sensory dimension of ethnographic fieldwork has expanded beyond considerations of the physical discomforts of exotic adventures, and has embraced the analytical possibilities enclosed in the embodied experience of a research context (e.g., compare: Georges and Jones, 1980 to McKinnon and Dombroski, 2019). However, the increased attentiveness to 'embodied ethnography' does not evidently include the specific embodied experiences of sexualized harassment encountered during fieldwork.

The power dynamics in social interactions during fieldwork again is not a novel topic. Reflexivity on such power dynamics calls for exploring the positionality of a researcher vis-à-vis those researched (see e.g., Lichterman, 2017). Positionality is not unilaterally defined: it is the dynamic outcome of a continuous social negotiation on social hierarchies. Different aspects of one's identity come into play as social hierarchies are negotiated, and the importance of one over other dimension can shift in a single interaction (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 80). Positionality is determined in the interaction with those in relation to whom one positions one's self, and it is constituted in and through power relations (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 77). In a research context, who I am, both my physical characteristics and how I have socially been formed, have consequences for how my research field will receive me: my gender, my age, physical (dis-) abilities, the color of my skin. These characteristics and how they combine in my person determine my positionality in a social setting: how others experience me and how I experience situations. To note, the combination of characteristics is not the accumulation of characteristics. Rather, the combination leads to a dynamic mixture, versatile to different contexts, connecting in dynamic flux to different constellations.

Sexuality plays a decided role in positionality and there is an appreciable amount of literature available on the sexual subjectivity of ethnographers and its possible impact on conducting a given research (for early and much referenced examples see Kulick and Wilson, 1995; Lewin and Leap, 1996). The connected angle on the safety of the researcher offers a modest range of reading (for instance Sharp and Kremer, 2006), with as general guidance how to best avoid possible sexualized harassment. Being actually harassed and

the role this can play in analyzing participant observations in the light of the research conducted is not usually highlighted. In academic discourse, the issue that predominates discussions on power and positionality is the power a researcher holds over the researched, through the power of interpretation and representation, the power of knowledge and wider horizon, the power of economic versatility. In the power dynamics between researcher and researched, the balance is often, implicitly or explicitly, argued to tip towards the researcher. That aforementioned characteristics of dominance can be undercut by gender in certain social settings is less readily pointed out (though see [Berry et al., 2017](#)).

Academic positionality

The significance of sexualized harassment experienced during fieldwork is not limited to the context of doing research, but also figures in the academic space in which research is brought out. Discussing encounters with sexualized harassment readily entails discussing the body against which the harassment has been exercised and how that body has experienced the harassment. Analyzing an encounter with sexualized harassment will require declaring positionality. Whereas attention for positionality in research is securely taking root in current academia (e.g., [Dodworth, 2021](#)), reflections on positionality often focus on the relation between a researcher and respondents in the research field. Reflexivity in the sense of regarding one's positionality within the academic field is much less common.

The positionality of a researcher in academia is nonetheless an important dynamic to consider. In this article I use the noun 'academia' and the adjective 'academic' to refer to what [Hiah \(2021\)](#) terms 'the researcher's field,' distinguishing it from the research field (although of course in practice these two can overlap). The researcher's field is where I as a researcher present my research to peers and engage in scientific discussions on what I present. Hiah coins the term 'researcher's field' to describe how expanding on her positionality within her research, namely being a child of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs and researching Chinese migrant entrepreneurs, impacted the way her research was received and evaluated. In particular, she articulates how transparency on her positionality gave rise to questions on her credibility as a researcher and on the validity of her research findings. [Berry et al.](#) discern a similar dynamic as they report on their positionality as 'black, brown, indigenous, mestiza and/or queer cisgender women' (2017: 537). [Massoud \(2022\)](#) identifies this dynamic as one of two components of what he calls 'the price of positionality.' He concurs that publishing positionality comes at a price, including the possible devaluation of the scholarly content of the work on which positionality is elucidated, as the expansion on positionality is thought to undermine scientific standards of neutrality or objectivity. A second dynamic Massoud points out is the emotional labour involved in articulating positionality, ever so more when connected to physical or psychological trauma. At the same time the experience of a certain trauma makes clarity on positionality ever so more relevant. Massoud identifies that "(C)alls to reflect on one's positionality and its effects on one's research methods in the field of law and society have been heeded most often by gendered, racialized, immigrant, queer, working-class, and

other marginalized scholars” (2022: S65). This is troubling, because the harms of positionality ‘accrue when scholars from majority populations do not speak about theirs, because that omission renders positionality peripheral to mainstream (...) scholarship’ (2022: S66). In this he reiterates what Hanson and Richards also argue, namely that “white men (...) are not forced to justify their positionality in the field in the same way woman and people of color are” (2017: 599).

The unspoken idea is that ‘valid’ ethnographic knowledge is obtained by a white male body. These fixations both increase the possible exposure to harassment and at the same time constrict the academic space to discuss and process such experiences. Discussing experiences of sexualized harassment requires declaring positionality and dealing with the consequence of that, in particular how it problematizes the position and subsequent valuation of the researcher within academic space. As one author words it: “‘Anthropologists’ don’t get harassed. Women do.” (Moreno, 1995: 246).

The role of law in the production of shared spaces of everyday life

Sexualized harassment was not the focus of the research in which I encountered it. It happened and was something to take into consideration in my going about, but only after iterative rounds of reflection did I appreciate the relevance of these fieldwork experiences for the project I was engaged in.

The overall research investigated the role law plays in the production of public spaces of everyday life (Chevalier, 2015b). Spatial scholars will readily recognize the phrase ‘production of space’, signaling that my work is located in the Lefebvrian tradition. In short, a given space is produced in such a way that it accommodates certain users and turns away other users (Lefebvre, 1991: 53). Considering access to public space as pivotal to presence and thus representation in the public domain (Habermas, 1989), the production of space is a central research interest of mine. Within this frame I focus on the role law plays in public space, and one subtheme is the role law plays in the social interactions in public space.

The research this article draws from specifically looked at municipal bans on the public use of soft drugs in the Netherlands in the period from 2008 to 2013. I conducted ethnographic research in three different sites to investigate how law operated in action (Pound, 1910). The case-studies concerned public spaces of everyday life, intensively used by different social entities with different ideas on the appropriate use of the shared spaces. It transpired that the bans on the public use of soft drugs addressed issues above and beyond the factual use of soft drugs in public space, but rather were called into existence as a strategy for spatial dominance.

Overall, the sites where I conducted fieldwork were fraught with social power plays, with different factions vying for dominance to ensure that the ‘production’ of that space would lead to a result that accommodates their needs and wishes. The push for codification of a social norm into law was one of multiple strategies in which dominance over the space was sought, but that strategy proved prone to backfire. The stakes were high: they concerned not merely deeply felt social convictions about acceptable and unacceptable behavior in shared public space, but in extension also the affirmation of world

views and the access to public space. How the power contestations materialized in the actual and physical social interactions in shared public spaces was a central focus of the overall research project.

The fieldwork experiences discussed in this article all occurred on a small neighborhood shopping square. The shopping square was heavily regulated public space, hosting closed circuit television surveillance (CCTV), a ban on gathering with three or more people, a ban on public use of alcohol and a ban on the public consumption of 'psycho-active substances,' including *qat*. Different factions vied for dominance in the shared space in order to accommodate their conflicting use of it. I researched the square through analysis of relevant policy documents, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, media analysis and extensive participant observation. The participant observation focused on physical social interactions taking place on the square (Goffman, 1963).

The opportunity to frequent the site over a longer period of time proved pivotal for my access to the social dynamics of this site, with contacts and exchanges picking up considerably during my second year on the site. Nonetheless, I clearly remained an outsider (Chevalier, 2015a) and was often considered an intruder. The latter was connected by the unrelenting suspicion that I was a formal enforcer of sorts. Early in my research one of my informants scolds me for entering the grill room the previous evening. In my fieldnotes I wrote down how he chides me: *You really gave them a fright yesterday in the grillroom. They thought, who is that, is she from the municipality, an enforcer on the ban on smoking. You gave the poor man a heart attack! You shouldn't do that. I told them: no, no, she is a researcher, but the proprietor was really scared. Everybody had to smoke outside. He was completely nervous, that you'd be from the municipality. All the ashtrays are gone from the counter.* In due time, most business went back to usual in my presence, though I was aware plenty of interactions were transferred beyond my sightline, or postponed till after I left.

As I became a familiar figure on the square, exchanges became easier. People started to recognize me and greet me, chat and hang out with me. Distinctly, in this ethnic-diverse and male-dominated space, comments on my physique were commonplace and continual, with a notable focus on the size of my bum. In some instances, I received direct inquiries and invitations. One informant, a wiry man twice my age and half my size, remained steadfast during the three summers we encountered each other in his attempts to woo me into his bed, assuring me it would be an unforgettable experience. These events did not register as sexualized harassment in my mind. Two incidents stand out in exception. The first opened this article, and consisted of the tangible encounter with a third leg. The second incident concerns a verbal communication, and at the time threw me much more than the explicit and unambiguous action of the third leg pressed up on me. My fieldnotes describe what happened:

“On a sunny Saturday afternoon, I've spent the better part of an hour talking to two young friends. One of them describes himself as Iraqi, aged 22 and the other as Yugoslavian, aged 19. Both are children of political refugees and grew up in this neighborhood. They are chilling on the square after work and have approached me to ask what my business is on the square. They answer my question set and our conversation continues on about work, future prospects, working

night shifts, partaking in the lottery, their logo-ridden crossover purse-bags, but also about getting hassled by the police, about hard drugs versus soft drugs, about getting a personal letter from the municipality that you are being monitored, just when you are trying to keep on the right track, and back to what it is like to be the child of political refugees that have never emotionally settled in their new country. The sun is shining, the atmosphere on the square is pleasant and I believe I am not the only one enjoying this conversation. Then something shifts. One of them starts to talk about his girlfriend, one of his many girlfriends actually, she's Dutch, and he plays dirty games with her, because that is what she likes. So... What about me? Do I also like to play dirty games? You know, dirty sex games?"

Unpacking experiences of sexualized harassment in the research field

I study the role law plays in urban dynamics, with a particular focus on social interactions and power contestations taking place in public space. I use participant observation to collect my data, and thus use my person—body and mind—as a research instrument. In this light everything I experience in the field is potentially relevant data, including encounters with sexualized harassment. In the following I expand on how I came to understand certain incidents as sexualized harassment, what the analysis of those incidents have brought my research and, last but not least, the response I have gotten in academic settings when discussing these experiences.

Experiencing sexualized harassment

Regarding my person, I am a cisgender female. At the time of the discussed incidents, I was in my late thirties, in appearance white (though a mixed lineage shimmers through on close inspection) and markedly middle class in hairstyle and social graces. I generally enjoyed spending time on the site where the incidents of sexualized harassment occurred. The space was convivial and vibrant, with almost always something going on and almost always familiar faces passing through. I spent considerable time on the square and in due course I learned to 'read' the space. Nevertheless, in the three odd years I spent on this site I was consistently perceived as an outsider. Of the countless encounters I had on this square, there were multiple incidents in which I got physically harassed and multiple exchanges where I would receive sexual invitations. In the two incidents that registered with me as sexualized harassment I did not feel my harasser was at any immediate level interested in a sexual liaison with me. Both incidents disrupted the power balance in which the social exchange up to that point had been unfolding. In both incidents I realized how comfortable I had been in the exchange up until the moment of the harassment.

The sexually loaded question on whether I liked dirty sex games threw me because it came so unexpectedly. I had been enjoying what I felt was a pleasant connection and I had the impression the two adolescents had also been enjoying our exchange. The question rattled me, and left me wondering: what happened here? In the immediate energy of the social exchange with the two adolescents as it unfolded, three thoughts came to my mind, all in connection to the bodily emotions that were induced by the question. The first was

that I was being addressed as a female. Up onto that point, this dimension of my identity had for me not been consciously in play in the social interaction. My second thought concerned the age difference: we were most definitely a generation apart and I realized I considered him a boy, not a sexual—and thus in a very particular manner ‘social’—peer. My third thought contemplated that I had at least 20 pounds on him, and I reckoned I stood a fair chance in case it got to a physical confrontation. My embodied experience of the remark did not register the question as light banter or convivial joking around; the question felt as an intentional affront, a deliberate act of aggression. His friend picked up on it too, boxed his shoulder and said: ‘hey man, don’t spoil it’. Subsequently, the one who asked the question broke off his stare at me, shrugged his shoulders and laughed, breaking the tension and clearing the air. However, a message had been communicated and communicating that message through sexualized harassment ensured that I received that message very clearly, very viscerally.

The message used gender to carry content across, but in my analysis my affront was being representative of the institutional realm that had sent the letters indicating they were being monitored, that tried to regulate their conviviality on the square through restrictive measures, that tried to dominate them. I embodied a hostile force that intruded in their space and the friendly conversation we shared should not be misread by me. The message transmitted by the sexually loaded question was that I should not forget I did not belong in the space I was participating in. The harassment sensitized me to a dynamic my harasser had already, either at a conscious or subconscious level, registered. Under the surface of my friendly convivial banter, I had not truly registered him as a social peer. The sexualized harassment peeled away the factors of age, color of skin and socio-economic standing on which I had, unconsciously but to all effects, established our social hierarchy. The harassment put all focus on gender. Bodily experiencing the power shift this caused in our shared social moment allowed me a much deeper understanding of the dynamics on the square than all other data collection put together. Feeling, through the emotional shift in my body (Ahmed, 2013), how the power relation between us transformed following the sexualized harassment, opened up space to reflect how in turn the balance might have felt for him before. Additionally, it brought the realization that formal law might prescribe our equality in that public space, but that does not mean reality also configures as such.

Embodied understanding

Encounters with sexualized harassment led me to a deeper understanding of two simultaneous dynamics concerning the role law played in the power contestations on the square. The first dynamic is that law plays a very limited role in the direct, physical exchanges. With the third leg pressed up against me my reflex was not to think about the juridical implications. The second dynamic is that law plays a central role in the overarching context in which the physical interactions take place. In that larger frame other aspects of my identity come into play; my status as an academic, my socio-economic possibilities, my socio-cultural capital. Otherwise put: my knowledge of the workings of law and legal institutions, the ease with which I traversed the space, the confidence with which I engaged in social encounters. The harassment was in part directed at all those

elements that I carried with me as I entered the square and altered the space through my presence. My initial visit to the grillroom neatly illustrates the impact of my presence: “Everybody had to smoke outside.”

The encounters with sexualized harassment formed pivotal moments in my fieldwork, they gave me a very real sense of the physical, embodied domain in which power plays were performed. An entire dimension opened itself up for observation, a dimension I had not previously recorded in any modus of really understanding of what went on there. In other words, the embodied experience of the aggression directed at my person considerable deepened my research on social power plays in shared public spaces of everyday life.

Going into the research I was taught to have eye for the impact of ethnicity, of socio-economic standing, and of gender on experiences in public space. Going into the field I was very aware of the color of my skin, the expense of my haircut, the shape of my bum. I put my hair up in a ponytail and tried to dress inconspicuously as I could, but I wasn't really fooling anyone. The research field quickly and surely identified the aspects of my identity it deemed relevant and brought those to the fore. It made me acutely aware of aspects I myself had not brought to the equation, and how those aspects mattered in the physical encounter. The manner in which the close encounter with the third leg played out, that warm summer evening in the café-grillroom, illustrates this neatly. How did I eventually disengage myself from the awkward position of being wedged between the bar and the third leg foisted upon me? And how did this involve aspects of my identity I had previously not acknowledged as being of consequence? In my fieldnotes I recorded it as follows:

“I pretty quickly manage to squeeze free and angrily tell him not to do this. In reply, he blows his top. He yells at me, first in my face and subsequently whilst he removes himself to the other side of the bar. Then he turns away from me and pointedly ignores me. I sense that if I leave at this point, I will forego my access to this pivotal place in my fieldwork site. So I remain where I am, sip my ice-tea and eventually strike up a conversation with another person in the bar. Meanwhile, I mull over on how to resolve the situation. Eventually, I do this by appealing to my personal status. When I am ready to leave, I approach my aggressor and ask if I can say something. He makes a dismissive gesture. I say, loud enough for all to hear, that I have a husband and that I am the mother of three young children. I want to give due respect, but for this I need to receive due respect. I do not want to have a problem with him, and I do not want him to have a problem with me. Can we agree to respect each other? And I offer him my hand for a handshake. He lets my hand hang mid-air for a moment too long, then shakes it, does not meet my eyes, but sighs ‘sure’. I figure this is as good as it will get, smile and say ‘wonderful’. I gather my coat and stuff, say a general good evening to everyone there and make my way out of place.”

Effectively, in the spur of the moment I appealed to several different repertoires at the same time: ‘belonging’ to another man (i.e., my husband), being a mother, being old enough to be the mother of three, the wish to give him his due respect, the handshake as expression of equality. In my perception, it was predominantly my seniority in age combined with the direct confrontation of the hand thrust out that induced my opponent to

respond as he did (-though I did not verify this perception at the time). In retrospect, other factors entered the stage that might have figured in the considerations of the man who harassed me. If not concretely the color of my skin and the expense of my haircut, then perhaps the matter of course confidence with which I had entered and appropriated the space. My presence unquestionably changed the production of that space: “all the ashtrays were gone from the counter.” In time, the ashtrays reappeared on the tables, but my presence changed the degree to which the space was accommodating for those who considered it their turf. Whereas formal law and the institutions that produce formal law were not usually at the forefront in the contained energy of the place, my presence did bring in unavoidable connotations to these institutions. I have come to analyze the sexualized harassment as a demonstration not so much of male dominance over my female body, but rather an objection to what my body represented and how it altered the space I entered. The modus through which dominance was asserted was gendered, the harassment was formatted in a sexualized manner, but the power contention played on a spatial axis.

Whether rightfully so, at no point during the incident did I feel veritably threatened. My main worry throughout the episode was maintaining access to this key location in my field. There were absolutely other incidents during my fieldwork in which I did feel physically threatened and or emotionally battered, but this was not one of them. The point here is that the fact that I did not feel threatened again is part of the analysis of the situation. In the given context, my age and social status countered the proposed power balance that the sexualized harassment pinpointed on gender—at least at my end of the exchange. Connecting to my research query: as the social showdown took place, formal regulatory schemes seemed very remote from all considerations. Whatever legal regulations were in place regarding for example physical assault, they played no role in the very immediate and sensory negotiation on social hierarchy that was enacted by the third leg being pushed up against me. This observation was a common thread and overall conclusion coming out of the larger research project: the codification of social norms into formal regulations had limited direct impact on the social exchanges and clashes in shared spaces of everyday life and on the negotiations of power balances and social dominance in those spaces.

The incidents and my subsequent deliberations on them were pivotal in the process of my research. I believe the explicit analysis of the incidences have enriched my understandings of the dynamics I researched. I also believe that explicitly reporting both the experiences and my analysis of them helps my audience to reach a deeper understanding of those dynamics. And that is precisely the argument of this article. At the same time, I feel it is important to make clear that the offered analysis of the incidents is not intended to condone the harassment. Nor do I want to imply that my detached experience of the harassment should be the norm. I demonstrate how taking this fieldwork experience as veritable data has worked *for me* to offer an example, not a standard others should adhere to.

To sum up, sexualized harassment is about power dynamics played out on gender difference (and/or sexual orientation) but potentially taps into much wider grounds for positioning social hierarchies, such as ethnicity or socio-economic standing. The power

play encompassed in sexualized harassment is played out at the physical level. From the viewpoint of embodied ethnography, experiences of sexualized harassment during fieldwork are a potential source of data and consequently it makes no sense to on forehand omit incidents of sexual harassment in data collected for analysis. One could even argue that remaining silent on such experiences impacts the transparency and accountability of data collection and subsequent analysis. Using experiences of sexualized harassment as data source to analyze power dynamics requires to also reflect on the overall social structures informing the thought processes of the researcher, and not only of the specific context under scrutiny. Research reflexivity here also involves thinking through how the academic domain understands sexualized harassment encountered during fieldwork, and the question of why such experiences are not highlighted in 'malestream' anthropological work.

Academic positionality

Discussing sexualized harassment experienced during fieldwork differs from telling other tales from the field. The topic is awkward to introduce and more often than not there is no evident momentum in a conversation to pick up on and introduce one's experiences. Once broached, it is often met with a startled reaction as the audience tries to figure out a suitable response to this unexpected turn in the conversation. Putting this topic on the table is like transgressing some unspoken code of polite behaviour and discussing sexualized harassment experienced during fieldwork is often hard work. [Massoud \(2022\)](#) speaks of the emotional labour that goes into sharing. In my case the emotional labour lies primarily in dealing with the emotions of my audience. These emotions overall break down into two categories. The first category is best characterized as general discomfort: the audience is ill at ease with the subject and unsure how to respond. The second category is when my audience is reminded of their own experiences. Reliving such experiences and sharing them can be emotional for my interlocutor, who is moreover often caught off guard and unprepared for the onset of those emotions. A wide range of incidents are recalled in response to my tale. People have shared with me their experiences of male to female sexualized harassment, but also female to male sexualized harassment, male to male threats of violence and concrete acts of violence. The common thread is that the narrator describes the difficulty of discussing—in a formal academic setting—the occurrence of such incidents and the impact they have had on the research at hand.

Upon sharing my encounters with sexualized harassment during fieldwork, I often get the response that this is very brave of me. My impression is my bravery is assigned to sharing an unpleasant experience. Perhaps this is true, but I would like to stress that the difficulty in sharing (for me) lies not (so much) on what an incident conveys to my private person, but (rather) on what it entails for my academic status. Talking about the incidents overwhelmingly centers my private person at the cost of my professional person. If indeed 'Anthropologists do not get harassed. Women do.' then letting on I've been sexually harassed seems to offer the conclusion I am not a veritable anthropologist. Notably, because discussing encounters with sexualized harassment is already such hard work, the next step—of how the events can be analyzed and what they say about the context I was

researching through participant observation within which the harassment took place—is too often a bridge too far. To note, I do not mean to argue the impact of sexualized harassment on a person should be negated or left out of a conversation. I do argue that by making the sharing more commonplace and less hard work, we can create space for bringing that conversation into the academic realm. I argue for a shared realization that, actually, anthropologists do get harassed.

Conclusion: The relevance of discussing experiences of sexualized harassment encountered during fieldwork

The expression of a ‘third leg’ is not commonly known in the academic circles I usually engage with. However, people grasp its meaning quickly enough when I relate the experience of having a third leg pressed up against you and the phrase ‘close encounters with a third leg’ for me has proven a good starting point to broach the topic of sexualized harassment. Whereas literature on sexualized harassment experiences during fieldwork is sparse, the exceptions I did find were inspiring and greatly helped to think through my own experiences, as well as the fact that such experiences are marginalized in academic discourse. This led to two aims for this article. First, to share my experiences in the hope that such sharing will become more common place and more mainstream. Second, to demonstrate the possible value of considering such experiences as veritable research data—rather than awkward surplus.

I have expanded on two separate incidents of sexualized harassment I encountered during fieldwork, one incident including bodily contact and one incident entirely verbal. Both incidents reflected a power contestation, rather than an expression of sexual desire. The harassment took on a sexualized form, but the intent was not a sexual come-on; it was directed at my gender and intended as a gender-based put-down (Soucek and Schultz, 2019). As such, the sexualized harassment I encountered was exemplary for the power contestations I was researching. The bodily experience of sexualized harassment whilst participating in the setting I was researching led to an understanding of those power contestations that went deeper than the interviews I had held and the observations I had done. It brought a visceral understanding on social boundaries in place in that setting, as well as the embodied ways those boundaries are guarded. It also brought home how law does not automatically play an immediate role in physical interactions, whilst further analysis of the encounters offered insight in how law does play a pervasive role in the larger constellation in which social encounters takes place.

In addition to insights for my research into power constellations in a specific public space, sharing my analysis of experienced sexualized harassment also brings to light marked dynamics in the academic domain. Discussing experiences of sexualized harassment entails discussing positionality and bringing the body of the researcher into the conversation, a body that in my case deviates from the ‘neutral’ norm of the white male body. Against the backdrop the unspoken, often unconscious, idea that ‘anthropologists do not get harassed’, talking about experiencing sexualized harassment shifted my (primary) status from ethnographer to that of a woman, and in turn encroached on the validity of the data gathered and the knowledge obtained. Discussing your positionality

comes at a price, especially when your positionality deviates from the ideological form of the white male bodied neutral (Massoud, 2022).

In order to organize understanding of the social world we study, social science research distorts reality into clarity (Law, 2004). In the process choices are made; information is highlighted or left out, pulled to the forefront or relegated to the background. In that general scheme, I argue that occurrences of sexualized harassment in fieldwork should be treated as all other occurrences; whether or not they are included should be decided on their relevance to the substance of the research, not on apprehensions regarding the admissibility and acceptability of such data. The fixations Hanson and Richards (2017) discern within the ethnographic academic domain in part reflect a reality. Ethnography can be a lonely challenge and just like real life at times contain dangers one cannot or chooses not to avoid. A free and honest discussion of unpleasant encounters does not diminish the ethnographic enterprise and can substantially deepen and enrich the analysis of ethnographic research. The first step is creating (more) academic space for sharing the discussion on the physical and emotional repercussions of such experiences without reserve, and allowing for the possibility that such events can be relevant research data. I sincerely believe the ethnographic project will be the better for it.

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ORCID iD

Danielle Chevalier  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0943-9285>

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Author Biography

Danielle Chevalier is an urban sociologist and socio-legal scholar, with a background in law and anthropology, as well as sociology. Her research agenda centers on 'law and the city', with a specific focus on the interplay between legal dynamics and social dynamics in urban settings. Her research interests range from the formal and informal regulation of sociality in spaces of everyday life to how law figures in the politics of urban governance.