



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif



Review

Beyond the empirical and the discursive: The methodological implications of critical realism for street harassment research



Rebecca Lennox^a, Rozzet Jurdi-Hage^{b,*}

^a Women's and Gender Studies, Sociology and Social Studies, University of Regina, Regina, SK S4S 0A2, Canada

^b Associate Professor, Sociology and Social Studies, University of Regina, Regina, SK S4S 0A2, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 August 2016

Revised 27 October 2016

Accepted in revised form 28 November 2016

Available online 8 December 2016

Keywords:

Critical realism

Street harassment

Causal explanation

Methodological pluralism

ABSTRACT

Given its substantial emancipatory and explanatory power, critical realism (CR) is a unique and valuable philosophy of science. Despite its strengths, however, there are few examples of applied CR in which the researchers clearly explain how critical realist philosophy informed their choice and use of methods. In what follows, we offer an integrated discussion of critical realist philosophy and praxis, one that threads critical realist philosophical underpinnings and applied research together through the topic of street harassment. We aim to illustrate the unique potential and promise of CR for the investigation of social reality, offering an accessible exemplar of applied CR in the form of a research proposal on street harassment. The paper is mostly directed towards novice researchers, offering a simple yet comprehensive discussion that concretely ties “high-level” philosophical discussion to practical research application through an illustrative example that can be adapted to differing political, social, economic, and cultural contexts.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Contents

Introduction	28
“The harm that has no name”: a review of street harassment and its impacts.	29
The limitations of positivism and interpretivism.	29
Critical realism: philosophical tenets and their implications.	31
Understanding street harassment: a structural analysis.	32
Applying structural analysis: the case of street harassment	33
Complicating causality: structure and agency in critical realist analysis	34
Understanding street harassment: a critical methodological pluralist approach.	35
Critical realism: the “best one of all”?	36
References.	37

Introduction

CR is a relatively new philosophy of science that takes tenets from both interpretivism and positivism, arguably without assuming the limitations of these orthodox research traditions (Bergin, Wells, and Owen 2008; McEvoy & Richards, 2006). Unique to CR is its potential to investigate social reality beyond the empirical, exposing generative

mechanisms and their underlying structures, and in so doing, offering the potential for social transformation. Despite the fact that CR is a philosophy of science with unique emancipatory and explanatory power, how to accomplish its programme is less straightforward (Sayer, 1997), given that there are few examples of applied CR in which the researchers clearly explain how critical realist philosophy informed their choice and use of methods. The lack of illustrative exemplars of CR has been noted by researchers working in a variety of fields (see, for examples, Danermark, 2002, DeForge & Shaw, 2012, Fletcher, 2016, Mustafa, 1998, Porter, 1993, Pratt, 1995, and Williams, 1999), and has been highlighted by Yeung (1997), who deemed CR a “philosophy in search of a method” (51).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lennox3r@uregina.ca (R. Lennox), rozzetjurdi@uregina.ca (R. Jurdi-Hage).

The goal of this paper is to provide an accessible example of applied CR. In this work, we aim to speak to novice researchers, offering a simple yet comprehensive discussion that concretely ties high-level critical realist philosophy to practical research application. First, the topic of street harassment is introduced. Following a brief discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of positivism and interpretivism, the paper then examines the explanatory potential of these approaches for street harassment research, utilizing examples of positivist and interpretivist research on street harassment to highlight the limitations of orthodox approaches. Following this, the philosophical foundations of CR are discussed and a critical realist causal explanation on street harassment is presented. Finally, a proposal for applied CR based on street harassment is offered, one that illustrates the critical realist concepts of abstraction by means of structural analysis, abduction, retroduction, and methodological pluralism.

“The harm that has no name”: a review of street harassment and its impacts

Street harassment is a transnational, transcultural phenomenon that impacts millions of people – the vast majority of whom are women – everyday. Despite its trivialization in popular culture and relative invisibility in scholarly literature, street harassment is a prevalent phenomenon that has extremely negative short- and long-term impacts on its individual targets, including shame, anger, restricted mobility, depression, reduced self-esteem, self-objectification, anxiety, and fear of navigating public spaces (Bowman, 1993; Day, 2001; Davis, 1994; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Kearl, 2010; Kissling, 1991; Lord, 2009). Street harassment must be acknowledged as problematic because, as Logan (2015: 197) states, it is one moment on “a continuum of violence against and oppression of femininities”, a moment that, if ignored and trivialized, serves to normalize sexually predatory behaviours, socialize men to dominate women, and perpetuate women’s subordination and marginalization.

Drawing on various definitions from the literature, this paper defines “street harassment” as an occurrence in which an individual invades the privacy of another individual unknown to them in a public place, through a look, gesture, or word that is often sexually explicit or evaluative in nature (Bowman, 1993; Davidson, Gervais, & Sherd, 2015; di Leonardo, 1981; Stop Street Harassment, 2014; Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010). While the definition utilized here is gender-neutral, the form of harassment it describes overwhelmingly occurs between a male harasser and a female target; indeed, research documents that regardless of the sex of their targets, men are overwhelmingly those who harass others in public spaces (Benard & Schlafler, 1984; Gardner, 1995; Kearl, 2010; Logan, 2015). Forms of street harassment range in severity, and can include ogling, sexually explicit comments, threats and gestures, and unsolicited, non-consensual touching and/or following (Bowman, 1993; Stop Street Harassment, 2014; Kissling, 1991; Macmillan, Nierobisz, & Welsh, 2000). Research reveals that fully 85% of Canadian women and 65% of American women report experiencing some form of street harassment in their lifetime (Stop Street Harassment, 2014; Macmillan et al., 2000). However, as will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, it must be noted that the prevalence rates presented in various studies, and the apparent differences between populations that these prevalence rates suggest, may in fact reflect methodological differences in research, rather than cultural or substantive differences between populations studied.

Highlighting the erasure of women’s autonomy engendered by the practise of street harassment, Gardner (1980) argued that the privacy women are denied in public spaces through street harassment positions women as “open persons” in public: persons who, like children, animals, or individuals acting “out of role” in some form, are seen as “open” to be intruded upon with comments, gestures, and other privacy invasions in public. As “open persons” women are “socially exempt” from the norm of civil inattention that typically governs interactions between strangers

in public places (Gardner, 1980). The breaches of civil inattention to which women are subject are particularly problematic, because, as researchers have previously noted, no matter how women choose to react, they still live with the reality of regular privacy intrusions, as any individual’s reactions do not alter the practise of street harassment to any significant degree (Benard & Schlafler, 1984; Davis, 1994).

In addition to denying women privacy and autonomy, the constant susceptibility to “low-level” victimization that women face in public due to street harassment can have the effect of increasing their overall fears of violent victimization, causing perennial “rape awareness” and anxiousness in public (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Ferraro, 1996; Macmillan et al., 2000; Pain, 1997). The fear that women experience in their navigation of public spaces impacts women’s day-to-day functioning in significant ways. Many women change their routes to work, avoid taking public transit, avoid walking alone, or cease appearing in public altogether at certain times of day in an attempt to avoid street harassment, all of which are practises that restrict their mobility, autonomy, and use of public space (Koskela, 1999; Lenton, Smith, Fox, & Morra, 1999; Thompson, 1994; Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010).

As a practice that increases women’s fears of rape and sexual victimization, restricts women’s mobility and access to public space, and denies women respect and autonomy, street harassment also impacts women psychologically. Research has found a correlation between experiencing sexual harassment with anxiety and depression, outcomes that may be side-effects of the self-objectification many women engage in as a result of constantly being objectified on the streets through comments such as “nice ass” or “nice legs” (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Self-objectification has significant and detrimental impacts, including body surveillance, body shame, and disordered eating (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010).

The many negative impacts that street harassment has on women as individuals –including fear, rape-wariness, denial of autonomy and respect, self-objectification, and depression – cumulatively impact on women, placing them in a disempowering and marginalized position in society. Taken together, the numerous effects of street harassment operate as a form of gender socialization, one through which women learn – through constant subjection to objectification, sexualization, and evaluation – to associate feelings of shame, disempowerment and victimhood with their identities as female/feminine (Kearl, 2010; Laniya, 2005).

Much more than limiting women’s mobility and denying them the right to navigate public spaces assured of respect and privacy, however, the environment of “sexual terrorism” (Kissling, 1991) that women face in public places functions to “genderize” public spaces, acting as a form of social control, and situating the public domain as a “male domain”, a domain in which women – as trespassers – are punished for their trespass through verbal violence (Davis, 1994; Koskela, 1999; Laniya, 2005; Lenton et al., 1999). In this way, street harassment accomplishes what Bowman (1993) called an “informal ghettoization” of women, relegating them to the private sphere.

Given the many documented negative impacts of street harassment, as well as the lack of exploration on this topic in scholarly literature to date (for recent comments on the lack of exploration, see, for examples, Davidson et al., 2015 and Fairchild, 2010), street harassment is a phenomenon that warrants further investigation – particularly, as we will later argue, investigation from a critical realist perspective that moves beyond simply finding statistical correlations between phenomena or reproducing discourse in place of explanation – to catalyze social change, so that women can navigate public spaces autonomously and without fear.

The limitations of positivism and interpretivism

In the paragraphs that follow, we briefly engage the key tenets of positivism and interpretivism, including each paradigm’s ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations. The discussion aims to

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4941975>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4941975>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)