

To explore the gendered nature of public sexual harassment we need more inclusive quantitative methods

Empirical research on public sexual harassment relies on categorical (mostly binary) methodological approaches to gender. [Ioanna Gouseti](#) suggests shifting from categorical to continuous measurements of sex and gender and utilising interdisciplinary methodological perspectives, can help provide a more thorough understanding of the gendered nature of public sexual harassment and help develop more effective responses.

[Public sexual harassment](#) is a worldwide phenomenon, disproportionately experienced by women as victims and men as perpetrators, leading to its characterisation as a [gendered form of violence](#). Although [violence against women](#) has been studied extensively, the focus has been overwhelmingly on domestic and work environments. Only recently has [sexual harassment in public](#) attracted more academic, [political](#) and [media](#) attention, with the emerging public discourse in the UK and related research suggesting that it is a [pervasive form of violence against women and girls](#).

Inclusive gender measurements and the 2021 census

Despite the recognition of the *gendered* nature of public sexual harassment, both the public discourse and the empirical exploration of the phenomenon relies on binary conceptualizations of gender, looking at differences in male and female experiences. Such approaches do not explore structural aspects of gender (identities, norms, stereotypes) and exclude individuals who do not identify with binary gender identities (e.g., transgender, non-binary, agender). A more inclusive conceptual approach to the gendered nature of public sexual harassment requires considering the *fluidity* of gender and operationalizing it as a 'spectrum' with physiological, legal, social and political elements.

In the UK, the 2021 Census involved a significant effort to collect more inclusive data on sex and gender. For the first time, the UK Census included two new [voluntary questions on sexual orientation and trans status](#), along with guidance on how to answer the Census sex question. Although such examples of collecting and analysing more inclusive data on sex and gender are not without [criticisms](#), this methodological approach has been endorsed by LGBT rights organisations and seen as a '[historic moment for LGBT+ communities](#)'.

The gendered nature of public sexual harassment

Notwithstanding their [limitations](#), such methodological practices provide an opportunity to expand the binary approach to the measurement of sex and gender. Employing more inclusive methodological practices for the measurement of sex and gender becomes particularly important in the context of phenomena that have been found to be gendered, such as public sexual harassment. Criminological research on public sexual harassment has not ignored the issue of [gender diversity](#). However, from a methodological point of view, existing empirical work that adopts a conceptualisation of gender that goes beyond the binary framework tends to be [qualitative](#). In the context of quantitative studies of public sexual harassment, employing mainly survey methodology, the measurement of gender involves either binary or [categorical approaches](#).

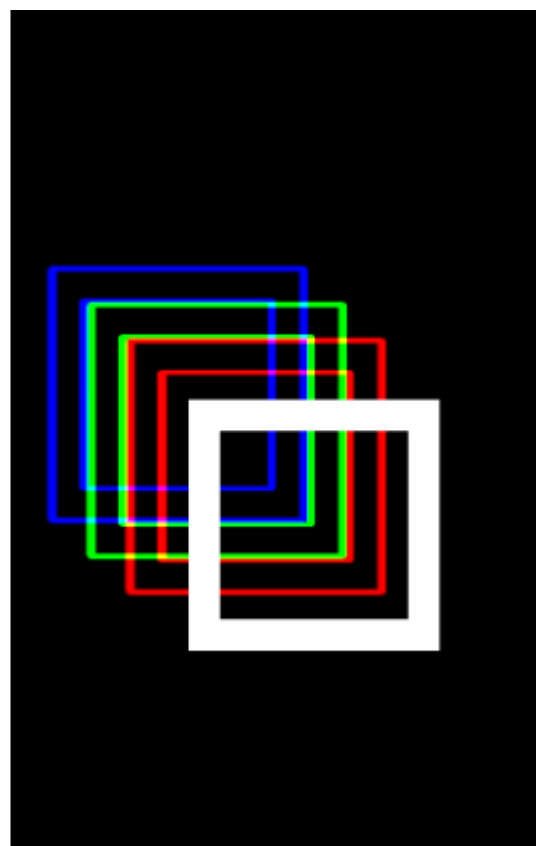
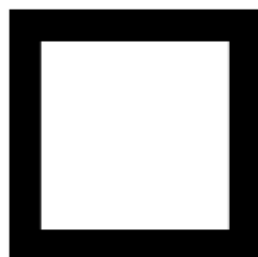
The way public sexual harassment is empirically explored, and the decisions about *who*, *what* and *how* is counted encompass worldviews, which are not value neutral. A binary or categorical approach to the measurement of sex and gender might not fully capture the gendered nature of public sexual harassment. In contrast, taking an inter-disciplinary approach to the measurement of sex and gender in the context of criminological research on public sexual harassment might help capture the fluidity of gender.

An interdisciplinary perspective on the measurement of gender

Psychological research on sex and gender, treating gender as a continuous rather than categorical variable, has shown that [masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive traits](#) and that gender nonconformity might be more normative than is widely

perceived. This body of work shows that one's biological sex might be determined at birth (in most cases), nevertheless one's gender identity, i.e., the development of stereotypical masculine and feminine personality traits, varies considerably. This means that although some people's gender identity is consistent with their biological sex, others incorporate an integration of both masculine and feminine traits (or what's been called '[androgyny](#)'). This research suggests that an alternative methodological approach to the measurement of sex and gender as categorical variables is necessary to capture its complexity and fluidity. Treating gender as a continuous variable instead takes into account that people might not identify with gender roles of their biological sex, while preventing the pathologisation [non binary gender identities](#).

There are two distinct traditions in psychological research, where gender is treated as a continuous variable, focusing on the one hand on personality and individual differences and on the other hand on social identity and self-categorization. The former involves [measuring instruments](#) that are developed to assess self-ascriptions of desirable personality traits that are stereotypical either of men (e.g., self-reliant, forceful) or of women (e.g., affectionate, sympathetic). In this context, it is assumed that people who endorse gender stereotypic traits as self-descriptive incorporate them into their self-concepts, also guiding their behaviour. The latter involves [self-categorization measures](#) requiring people to report directly on their identification with gender groups.



Drawing on this body of work, broadening the conceptualization and measurement of gender from a categorical (mostly binary) to a continuous variable, utilizing interdisciplinary methodological practices, provides us with the opportunity to explore more thoroughly the gendered nature of public sexual harassment. However, this is can only be a first step in the process of exploring empirically the gendered nature of public sexual harassment through quantitative methodologies. It is thus highly exploratory, with one of its main aims being the development of different and more inclusive methodological approaches to the measurements of sex and gender in the context of criminological research. For example, in the context of public harassment in public, different instruments could be used to measure [gender identities](#) as well as gender-related [self-categorization measures](#), along with more 'mainstream' survey questions about sex and gender.

The gendered nature of public sexual harassment indicates that it does not involve behaviours of 'bad people' doing 'bad things', but reflects a society where certain gendered views, attitudes and behaviours are normalised or perceived and experienced as acceptable or even to an extent [desirable](#). Public sexual harassment can be seen as

an element of the [continuum of sexual violence](#), adjacent to sexual assault and rape. If it is a gendered phenomenon, as the bulk of empirical research suggests, its gendered nature needs to be explored through inclusive, non-binary methodological approaches to gender, so that it is understood more thoroughly and addressed more effectively.

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