

## Moving Violations

From The New York Times

By Deborah Tannen

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RECENTLY, the New York City police arrested 13 men, saying they had groped or flashed women on the subway. Reading the press reports that followed, in which many women told of similar assaults, I was reminded of one of the first academic papers I published — an analysis of how Greek women talked about just such experiences.

I was also reminded of my own experience on the New York subway.

I was 15 and in my first year at Hunter College High School. Taking my usual route to school, I was riding a crowded express train to Manhattan from Cortelyou Road in Brooklyn. At the center of a crush of people holding onto a pole, I became aware — I thought — that my leather purse, which was hanging from my arm, had gotten jammed between my legs. I moved my arm to dislodge it and discovered, to my horror, that the purse moved, but the pressure remained. I stood frozen in fear. When the train pulled into the Prospect Park station, the pressure finally disappeared, and I saw a man in a suit look back at me as he stepped onto the platform.

That was the last time I took an express train to school. Instead I added a half-hour to my commute in order to catch the local, get a seat and keep it all the way to Manhattan. And forever after, I got a queasy feeling when the doors opened at the Prospect Park station. I think I expected that man to get back on.

This memory eventually receded, like the man through the subway doors. But it resurfaced 15 years later when, as a member of a team investigating how people talk about personal experiences, I asked New Yorkers if they'd had any memorable experiences on the subway. Indeed they had. And most of the stories I heard from women were about being groped, flashed, rubbed against or otherwise molested by men.

Around the same time, I spent eight months doing research in Athens, so I decided to record Greek women recounting narratives I could compare to the New Yorkers'. Since most of the subway stories were actually molesting stories, I asked Greek women if they'd ever been molested.

The experiences the Greek women described were similar to those I'd heard from Americans. But there was a difference. Most of the American women — like those recently interviewed in the New York news media — told me they had felt humiliated and helpless and had done or said nothing. Of the 25 stories Greek women told me, only eight concluded with the speaker doing nothing. In the others, she said she had yelled, struck back or both.

One Greek woman told of walking to school with a friend when they were 12 years old, and encountering a man who exposed himself. Their reaction? "We grabbed some rocks and started aiming at his head. How we didn't kill him I don't know. We started to scream out loud." Another said: "I have given smacks. I have given a punch to a sailor. I have given kicks."

She went on to say that when she traveled she kept a rock in her pocket for protection, and she described how she used it on a repulsive man who had been dogging her and a friend on vacation in Venice.

Though my research focused on how the women talked (the Greek women were vivid story-tellers, using the present tense and setting dramatic scenes with dialogues and details), I can't help pondering the differing actions the two groups of women described. Surely some general cultural patterns are at play.

For one thing, most Greeks, like their Mediterranean neighbors, place value on expressiveness, whereas American culture is influenced by the Northern European and British emphasis on public decorum. That's why Americans often mistake animated Greek conversation for argument. Another cultural difference is how readily strangers get involved in others' interactions. I once saw two men arguing on an Athens street; when one raised his hand to strike, he was immediately restrained by a passer-by.

This incident may help explain another Greek woman's account of a strange man who followed her and then approached with unwanted advances. She told me: "I yelled and I gave him a strong smack. He had become so enraged that he jumped at me and he wanted to hit me," but a man who happened to be standing close by "intervened and cursed him and he left." Would she have risked enraging a stranger if she were less confident that another stranger would leap to her aid?

Whatever the reasons for them, the different ways of responding to public molestation led to different emotional reactions. Though many of the Greek women reported feeling anger and fear, they didn't talk about feeling helpless, as many American women did, and as I recall feeling when it happened to me. Equally dreadful was the sense of isolation: though you're in a crowd, something is happening only to you, and no one else knows.

Speaking out dispels that isolation, as well as the sense of shame that it reflects and reinforces. Knowing that she had acted allowed at least one of my Greek storytellers to transform a potentially traumatic experience into bonding through shared laughter. The rock-wielder said that after the Venetian pest had fled, her friend "was dying of laughter, rolling on the floor," and then "the laughter grabbed me too" and they were both "laughing about how we had thrown him out willy-nilly."

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