



PALGRAVE HATE STUDIES

Researching Hate as an Activist

Exploring LGBTQ+ Online Hate,
Its Impacts, and Our
Responsibility Towards Equality

Rachel Keighley

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Palgrave Hate Studies

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This research is dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community.

Thank you to my research participants for shaping this research into what it is. Your trust in me to share your experiences means everything. Your strength and resilience in the face of hate and discrimination is an inspiration. You are changing the world, and I hope by sharing your stories in this work, I can help make the world a safer place for you.

To my trans siblings, know that you are valid. There is no LGB without the T, and I will continue to fight for you and with you.

To LGBTQ+ young people. Whether you're out, letting people in, or exploring your gender and sexuality privately you are beautiful just as you are. The world can seem like a scary and lonely place when you feel like you can't be yourself. We should never have to hide, and I'm fighting every day for a world in which identity is celebrated. Let this work stand as a dedication towards the fight for equality. You will always have a home in the LGBTQ+ community and I will not rest until you feel safe to be you.

Finally, to Shay. Your memory and the work you started lives on in this thesis.

Rest now, Resting is Resistance.

PREFACE

When writing this book, I wanted to challenge myself as an academic, writer and above all, as an activist. My time researching LGBTQ+ online hate and engaging in social justice movements opened my eyes to the incongruity between academic research and on-the-ground activist movements. I did not want my PhD research to be another academic research project that sat on the university shelf. I wanted to ensure I was making real change, that I was thinking critically about the role of the neoliberal university, and my complicity within these hierarchical and unequal social structures.

Having read Cann and DeMeulenaere's (2020) *The Activist Academic*, Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly's (2021) *Anti-racist Scholar Activism*, and Weatherall's (2021) *Reimagining Academic Activism*, I was inspired to ensure that my own research was similarly antagonist, political, and embedded in activism. I arrived at the University of Leicester in 2018 to explore online hate targeting LGBTQ+ young people and I graduated with a desire to evolve as an activist academic and ally to all marginalised communities.

Hate Studies is a personal topic area for me, stemming from my own experiences of hate, but one which nonetheless I am honoured to be able to research on behalf of all communities without a voice. It has given me a sense of purpose within my academic career, but also within my personal life to ensure that no marginalised community ever feels left behind. I have been challenged as I have explored my own sexuality and gender

identity and have pushed the envelope of thought regarding academic research beyond traditional academic borders. My research is more critical and necessarily self-reflective, and I hope my activism continues to evolve and improve too.

Although the case study used within this book pertains to my PhD project, it exemplifies my journey into research as activism and it is my sincere hope that this book motivates other academics, practitioners, and community members to think about the ways they can engage in social change and how we are all beholden to each other to make this world a better place than the way we found it.

The world is bleak right now, and as we enter 2024, I am often crippled with worry over the ways LGBTQ+ individuals, people of colour, homeless people, people with disabilities, immigrants, and the working class to name but a few are continually subjugated, marginalised, and made to feel less than. I have no confidence in our current political and criminal justice systems to protect ALL citizens, not just the few, and I worry that things will only get worse.

Yet, within this darkness, there are pockets of light, movements of resistance, and moments of solidarity as marginalised communities and our amazing allies continue to stand up and fight for equity and social justice. It is these movements that this book and my work seek to be a part of. I hope the reader engages critically, and are inspired to similarly take up the mantle to prevent hate, and to be an ally and activist.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have agonised over this section and how to adequately put my thanks into words. To summarise in a few short paragraphs does not seem to do justice to the immeasurable gratitude I feel to my support group. But I will do my best to try.

First, to my mentors and PhD supervisors Professor Neil Chakraborti and Professor Teela Sanders. Neil—you are my inspiration. Thank you for your continued belief and support in me. It has been a pleasure to work with you all these years. Your work as a hate crime scholar has driven me to become a better researcher and your kindness as a human makes you an absolute privilege to know.

Teela—thank you for joining my supervisory team halfway through my PhD journey. Your reputation as an academic and a person precedes you, and to say you are a wonderful human being is an understatement. Thank you for pushing and challenging me to make my work better and for always being available whenever I needed help. Working alongside you in researching modern slavery developed my work as an activist researcher and further inspired in me my dream to continue to change the world.

I am the luckiest person in the world to have a supportive family and partner behind me. Your support behind the scenes has motivated me to transform this book into something I am truly so proud of. Chloe—how do I even put into words how much you have done for me? Whether you've consoled me as I have cried through fear/stress or made my favourite food and cheered me on through all my wins, your support

has been instrumental in this process. Your love and belief in me mean the absolute world. I will never be able to thank you enough.

Mum and Dad—thank you for putting up with my decade of higher education! In all seriousness, your generosity and support to follow my dreams has enabled me to do this work. Thank you for always believing in me and for everything you do. Teddy—my little sausage dog! Thanks for providing endless laughs, for always being up for a walk or a cuddle, and for always putting me in the best mood.

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Introduction

Abstract As social science researchers, it is important to recognise our underpinning motivations for why we choose to research certain topics. Our experiences, interests, and personalities shape who we are and how we move through society (Nelson, 2020). Moreover, the motivations behind social science academic research now flow heavily from engaging with communities, policy, and social change (UKRI, 2023). This book shares my experiences as both an academic researcher and activist. Thus, this introductory chapter presents the concept of research as activism, through a case study of my PhD research project, sharing the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people aged 13–25 online and the ways in which they are exposed to hate targeting their sexuality. The book stands as a call to action for the reader, thus demonstrating the power of social science research to engage wider communities in social action.

Keywords Hate crime · Queer · Queer criminology · Research impact · Activist research

We are living in times that will demand courage. When people ask me how do I draw hope, how do I stay encouraged, how do I continue to show up? The answer is that I look back. I look back and I look at how my existence here today is owed entirely to the courage of people who came

before me. And so, what do I owe myself in that moment and to those who come after me? To exercise courage in this moment.

—Bree Newsome Bass

INTRODUCTION

This book focuses on the concept of research as activism by sharing my experiences as both an academic researcher and activist whose work engages meaningfully with LGBTQ+ communities with lived experience of online hate. Current socio-political affairs (such as Brexit, the UK's Illegal Migration Act, halts to reforming the Gender Recognition Act and Suella Braverman arguing that being gay is not enough of a reason to claim asylum in Britain) have demonstrated how it is inadequate for academic research to merely point out the problem and promote social change through further research recommendations. There is a need for researchers to engage with social change that speaks to decision-makers in policy and law, as well as the affected communities whose lives we research (Sanders et al., 2022). Activist scholars recognise the importance of research that includes meaningful engagement and inclusivity whilst challenging research that is tokenistic. Sanders and colleagues (2022: p. 5) highlighted the importance of being explicit about your rationale for research, 'the inclusions and exclusions, the focus and silences, the questions we ask, and the questions we fail to ask'. We, as academic researchers, can change the status quo in the public and policy domain, therefore, we must reflect on the ways we approach research, how our worldview and privilege inform our role in the process, and what we do with the knowledge we produce.

Thus, hate crime research must not stay contained within academia but must be held accountable to those who have experienced hate crimes and who share their experiences with us (Zempi, 2023). Consequently, this book stands as an argument for research as activism, through a case study of my PhD research project. The book shares my motivations for becoming an activist researcher, lessons, and best practice guidance on activist research, whilst perhaps most importantly, shaping our knowledge of online hate and how we respond to its commission. The research case study in question represents important work within my activism, but this book also provides a useful example of research as activism. It explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people aged 13–25 online and the

ways in which they are exposed to hate targeting their sexuality. Recent polls suggest that as many as 1 in 6 people are LGBTQ+ (Gallup, 2021; IPSOS, 2021; Vice Voices, 2020). Yet heterosexuality and cisgender identity remain the sociocultural default and are accepted unquestioningly as objective facts. LGBTQ+ identity is not assumed but is subject to verification, in which individuals must explain and justify their sexuality or gender identity in ways their hetero-, cis-normative counterparts do not.

In challenging this status quo, this research highlights the pervasive nature of all forms of identity-targeted hate online and the emotional and behavioural impacts on the LGBTQ+ community specifically. The study utilised a mixed methods project surveying 175 LGBTQ+ young people and 14 follow-up interviews. Through a participant-driven approach, LGBTQ+ young people were at the centre of building the knowledge base, defining online hate, exploring the full spectrum of identity-targeted hate and the multitude of responses required through a queer critical criminology lens. The research methods and findings tell a narrative driven by and through LGBTQ+ voices, highlighting the importance of research *with* LGBTQ+ young people. The findings also demonstrate the importance of a cohesive criminal justice and societal response to online hate, beyond contributing to academic knowledge, underpinned by a broader educational effort on sexuality, gender and difference. The research study therefore stands as a call to action for the reader, thus demonstrating the power of social science research to engage wider communities in social action.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICES AND MOTIVATIONS FOR ACTIVIST RESEARCH

Traditional academic practice prides itself on being objective, void of bias, and merely a tool to state the facts (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020). But the social world is neither objective and nor are we unbiased beings who separate our personal lives from the professional. Arguably, nor should we. Who we are shapes what we do in our lives, and what we do has a direct impact on our sense of self and the communities we inhabit. When academia presented me with the opportunity to research my identity and the inequalities I face as an LGBTQ+ person, I was met with the challenge of utilising academia and its privileged position as a source of authority to support my community.

Queer criminology as activism challenges and changes the problems which it researches (Ball, 2014). Belknap defines activist criminology as one in which ‘criminologists engage in [practices that seek to achieve] social and/or legal justice at individual, organisational, and/or policy levels, which [go] beyond typical research, teaching, and service’ (Belknap, 2015: p. 5). Freire (1996) similarly defined activism as praxis, reflecting upon the social world and acting to transform it. Thus, criminological, and social science research can no longer afford to be merely tokenistic but work to affect change whilst also inspiring others to think critically, work through unequal social processes, engage with socio-political issues, and not be deterred from working on challenging subjects or in challenging environments (Sanders et al., 2022). Thus, the researcher who is also an activist must be analytical, reflective, and transformative (Aronowitz & Giroux, 2003). We must advocate for social justice, whilst moving beyond the constraints of academia to be active allies with marginalised communities, whilst refusing to be complicit in heteronormative structures that maintain inequalities (Gramsci, 1971). Beyond just sharing your research findings you must be active in movements to affect social change.

To reconcile traditional academic research with activism is a debate that has been raged among activist scholars for some time (for some good examples see: Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020; Freire, 1996; Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021; Weatherall, 2021). Research can inspire change on many different platforms, from the ways we engage research populations, research that is underpinned by diversity, equity, and inclusion values, to the ways we shape social justice and inspire and align with marginalised communities. It is often these changes that motivate us to engage in research, but it is our personal stories that shape the narrative to research any given topic and can motivate the delivery of social change and alliance with marginalised communities.

With this and with complete transparency in mind, I thought it important to share my motivations for becoming an activist researcher. In 2016 I was 22 years old and working towards my Criminology Masters at Durham University. During that time my female partner came to visit me. One day, we were walking up a main road holding hands, when a group of young males in a car rolled down their window to shout profanities at us and beep their horn. They then circled the roundabout ahead to go past us again, repeating their slurs. As someone who struggled to come to terms with their sexuality two years prior for fear my friends and

family would reject me, I had perhaps naively overlooked the attitudes of strangers towards me. I had failed to understand that society marginalised people who were viewed as ‘different’ from the norm, such as myself, and that through my journey of accepting myself and being more visible, I was opening myself up to potential harm, discrimination and even hate.

A few hours of research later, I became aware of a world in which difference was the target of oppression and hate. Despite growing up in an accepting environment, my background had failed to impress upon me the nuances of identity, and how it feels to be considered a second-class citizen. I decided then to dedicate my working life to understanding identity-targeted hate and finding ways to support all marginalised communities through research and activism. I recognise that inherent in this is a selfish motivation, I work to prevent LGBTQ+ inequalities due to experiencing those inequalities. However, I also recognise my privilege, I am a white, middle-class, femme presenting person, who in many ways can blend into the social construct of the straight, cisgender narrative. But many of my peers cannot, and nor should they have to. Conforming to, and rebelling against identity norms is a theme explored continuously in this book. Research forms an important part of the impetus for change, yet it is merely a wheelhouse and tool we use to start the conversation, identify ‘facts’ we can present to the social world, and thus, give credence and gravitas to our arguments that, in this case, we should be working towards a world in which online hate is condemned and LGBTQ+ identities are accepted and celebrated.

It is demoralising that this research is even necessary, and that in 2023 equality has not yet been achieved. Conducting research on any aspect of identity that is personal to you is difficult, as such I was careful to document the ways my sexuality motivated my research, as well as the effects the research had on me. I did not anticipate the emotional strain such personal research would have on my mental well-being. We hear of activists facing activism fatigue, where the role of working tirelessly to justify one’s own existence and need for rights becomes overwhelming. It is not easy to create change, to alter the status quo and to challenge existing structures which assign you a place in a hierarchy of privilege. Given the ongoing Pride movements, or if we look wider, we are witnessing protests and activism for Black Lives Matter, abortion rights, and the Me-Too movement, we can see how those whose voices shout the loudest in those spaces are typically those whose rights and lives are