

Discussion Note

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Positionality in a Contemptuous Time: Ethical Considerations and Discussions on Researching Language, Gender, and Sexuality

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Abstract: This article explores some of the ethical considerations about researching language, gender, and sexuality studies. In particular, it focuses on the potential risk posed to researchers from the perspectives of physical and mental health, especially as caused by conducting critical linguistic research into violent online misogyny, transphobia, and homophobia. I argue that there has been an increase in hate-based incidents related to gender and sexuality, and that while scholars are doing high-quality research in language, gender, and sexuality studies, these incidents might dissuade others from entering or remaining in the field. I also argue that there is some hostility towards scholars challenging gender-based hegemonies, which has real-world impacts on researchers. I highlight that there is a lack of support systems in Higher Education Institutions, and that sometimes the frameworks provided by these organisations are not conducive to safe research into the language of online gender/sexuality hate. I also argue that some of the frameworks, goals, and guidelines provided by Higher Education Institutions can misalign with norms of the discipline. As such I highlight where there are systematic shortcomings, in the hopes that affirmative action might be taken to better facilitate the continuation of high-quality research into language, gender, and sexuality studies.

Keywords: ethics; researcher protection; positionality; targeted harassment

1 Introduction

In June, 2023, a professor and two students at the University of Waterloo, Canada, were stabbed during a class dedicated to gender studies, with police later

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commenting that they “believe this was a hate-motivated incident related to gender expression and gender identity” (Levine 2023). This incident was shocking because it is one of the few instances where physical actions motivated gender-based hate and violence managed to reach a University classroom – a place of work and study which is supposed to be a safe environment. In addition to this specific incident, gender and sexuality-motivated hate crime more broadly appears to be on the rise. Although the data available for hate crime rates in Canada is somewhat limited, the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, which obtains data from 180 police forces, suggests that hate crime based on gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation rose from 240 recorded instances in 2018 to 580 in 2022 (Statistics Canada 2023). Similarly, in England and Wales, numbers of recorded hate-motivated incidents have increased year-on-year between 2017 and 2023, with hate crime on the basis of sexuality or transgender identity accounting for 30,507 instances in 2021/2022 (Gov UK 2023). Although it is hard to prove a direct and causal effect between the increase in hate crime and the attack at the University of Waterloo, this incident, these statistics, and as will be discussed in a later section vocal negative reactions towards any topic related to gender more broadly, paint a somewhat scary picture for people researching topics around gender and sexuality – including those interested in the relationship between language, gender and sexuality. Not only did this incident make a number of scholars who research topics related to gender and sexuality consider their safety in their professional working environments (see, for example, skelton’s 2023 article for *The Conversation*), but also several scholars have been on the receiving end of a barrage of both online and in-person targeted harassment due to their research and positionality (see Heritage forthcoming; Lawson 2023 for examples).

With recorded figures of hate-based incidents on the rise, this short paper seeks to explore two key areas: first, it investigates previous work which engages with the ethical considerations of conducting gender and sexuality-based linguistic analysis within hostile environments. As Jones (2023, 2) observes: “this year we saw more unrest around the world as a result of discrimination and inequality”, before later highlighting the development and mainstreaming of transphobic ideologies. I argue that, unfortunately, with the current trends in hate-based incidents, the rise of gender-‘critical’ ‘feminism’¹ (a re-branding of transphobia), and the mainstreaming of male supremacist ideologies facilitated by social media, many online spaces offer a segment of hostility towards language, gender, and sexuality scholars. As I do not

¹ Note, I do not view ‘gender critical feminism’ as either critical or feminist in nature (and as such have used scare quotes around the terms). I view the ideologies of this ‘movement’ as reductive, and enforcing of hegemonic and restrictive notions of gender performance. Ultimately, there is nothing ‘critical’ about enforcing and maintaining oppressive structures, and nothing ‘feminist’ about fighting for the oppression of a marginalised gender-based group – whose historical presence has pioneered gender and sexuality-based rights for decades.

wish to give more notoriety to prominent transphobic figures, particularly because citing such poor scholarship and ideologies can lead to an air of credibility, I will not be citing literature from gender-‘critical’ ‘feminists’ here (for a discussion of the imperative to avoiding citing this kind of work in a legal context, see Fradella 2023). However, a review of the tenants of gender-‘critical’ ‘feminism’, as well as several excellent points which highlight the problematic nature of such philosophies is provided by Zanghellini (2020). While it may be argued that it is not fully possible to reduce gender-‘critical’ ‘feminism’ to ‘transphobia’, previous work has shown that almost all facets of gender-‘critical’ ‘feminist’ ideology are underpinned by trans-exclusionary and transphobic prejudices. In other words, while the language used to express, and actions carried out based on, gender ‘critical’-‘feminism’ may be complex, they are all configurations of transphobia (see Zanghellini 2020).

Many transphobic gender-‘critical’ ‘feminists’ are vocal on social media and harass some pro-trans gender studies academics. Indeed, there also appears to be a manifestation of right-wing political ideology across Europe and the USA, which advocates for a backlash against anything related to gender and sexuality studies. This backlash can be seen with some nations and states going as far as to try to litigate against gender-studies being taught in schools and universities. These right-wing configurations of power which seek to delegitimise the study of gender and sexuality (from multiple perspectives, including linguistic), have also enabled and encouraged online targeted harassment towards scholars specialising in these areas. There is, historically, a continuum between online and offline hate-motivated actions, and in turn these factors suggest an increasingly difficult and hostile environment for researchers, who might now face both physical and digital harms.

The second focus of this paper is to draw attention to the current lack of systems in place for protecting researchers from the threat of violence. The two foci of this paper lead to a discussion about the need for systemic change to enable more high-quality research in language, gender, and sexuality studies. Finally, it makes some tentative suggestions to both researchers and institutions for ensuring that vital research on language, gender, and sexuality is able to thrive during this challenging period.

2 Conducting Language, Gender, and Sexuality Research Within Hostile Environments

When discussing ethical considerations, there is often a tendency for researchers to focus on considering how their actions may impact potential participants (see Rüdiger and Dayter 2017; Eckert 2014). This is, undeniably, an important aspect of all

research involving human participants – and, in linguistics in particular, is an aspect which should be considered even in research where publicly available texts written by humans are analysed (see Heritage 2022). While this paper is not to dismiss the vital ethical considerations of protecting humans whose language is analysed, nor the work which has considered the relationship between linguistic scholars and the producers of linguistic data being analysed, it does seek to focus on lesser discussed aspects of ethics: positionality, self-protection, and institutional protection.

Several authors have called for the need for language, gender, and sexuality scholars to be self-reflexive (see Baxter 2008; Mackenzie 2017; Spilioti and Tagg 2017). This involves a process of critically engaging with one's own identities, attitudes, and ideologies in relation to the data, participants, and context of research. However, beyond this, less work has engaged with the reflexivity around dealing with distressing data (though, see Aiston 2023; Rüdiger and Dayter 2017). Previous work discussing dealing with 'unlikable' participants and 'atrocious quotes' (see Rüdiger and Dayter 2017) has argued for the need for researchers to protect their own mental health (see also Heritage forthcoming). However, most of this research has been localised to research on topics such as the representation gendered social actors on the loosely-connected network of anti-feminist communities known as the Manosphere. Less work, to date, however, has engaged with the ethics of doing this kind of research more broadly and in a society which is becoming increasingly hostile towards work in cognate disciplines.

Although an extensive search of the literature did not reveal publications which explicitly deal with the potential risks to teaching and researching language, gender, and sexuality studies, research from gender studies has addressed similar risks. For example, research based in educational sociology has explored media representations of a school which taught 'transgender issues' (see Morgan and Taylor 2019). Morgan and Taylor take a single case study where a primary school sought to include transgender education, particularly around exploring different gender identities and sexualities. They go on to explore some of the challenges in teaching gender-studies and adjacent topics, particularly within set governmental frameworks. Morgan and Taylor focus on how the head teacher's interpretation of governmental legislation was constructed as personal wrongdoing (Morgan and Taylor 2019, 24). These findings and discussions were not too dissimilar to the discussions offered by DePalma and Atkinson's (2009) discussion about the representation of the No Outsiders campaign in Birmingham, UK (see also Sauntson 2020). However, something distinctly missing from Morgan and Taylor's discussion is the impact of media reporting on the mental (and possibly physical) well-being of the primary school teachers. Indeed, barrages of media abuse, particularly around gender and sexuality, have led others to end their own lives (as has been the case with, for example, transgender teachers – see Gupta 2019).

With the increased (negative) media cover of transgender issues and transgender education, I would argue that (some) language, gender, and sexuality scholars may be somewhat wary about their teaching and research practices. Anecdotally, I am aware of colleagues who research the linguistic construction of violent misogyny and male supremacism who have removed as much of their media presence as possible, to protect themselves from online abuse – both from individuals and the press more broadly. For example, Lawson (2023) discusses how he took several steps to protect his identity when working on digitally mediated masculinities (including work on the manosphere), going so far as to remove his staff profile from his University's webpage.

Indeed, the protection from online harms is something which many researchers of the so called 'manosphere' (and related communities) must consider. There have been several incidents where people who disagree with alt-right political views towards gender/sexuality, and related communities have been doxed,² swatted,³ or been victim to a barrage of targeted harassment (see Heritage forthcoming). Although this is possibly less applicable to some researchers in language, gender, and sexuality who do not necessarily research these extremist communities, most of the current research in language, gender, and sexuality studies nevertheless (rightly) takes a critical approach to discourses of gender and sexuality⁴ (see Lazar 2017; Motschenbacher 2017) which challenge normative and constraining power structures of gender/sexuality. These challenges to normative power structures place researchers in somewhat vulnerable positions: they are often up against powerful institutions with vested interests, for whom systemic change would not be beneficial. This can lead to difficulties with conducting 'impactful' research in a way that does not receive backlash or resistance from these groups of people (see Lambert 1992).

Indeed, an area discussed infrequently in the academic literature is that of digital harms. Work which has looked at the relationship between digital harms and ethics has typically focused on how digital media can facilitate potential harms towards particular communities or service users (see, for example, Facca et al. 2020). Less work in linguistics, however, has explored the idea that researching violent online communities might result in online targeted harassment. While some authors have looked at the impact of mental health on researchers doing this kind of research (see Rüdiger and Dayter 2017; Heritage forthcoming), the risk of digital harms (including, for example, having to remove oneself from all social media) is still

2 Doxing is the act of revealing identifying information about someone online, such as their, home address, workplace, phone number and so forth.

3 Swatting is the act of making a false report of a serious crime, such as a bomb threat, in order to send a SWAT team or other law enforcement officers to a targeted location. This is often a very traumatic experience for the victim.

4 This is not to be confused with the use of 'critical' in the transphobic 'gender critical' movement.

present. Given that many academics, including those researching language, gender, and sexuality, utilise social media in both professional and personal capacities, there appears to be an emerging need to consider what harm barrages of abuse online might cause. For example, sharing research which takes an actively pro-‘x’ minority stance might result in a dogpile⁵ from anti-‘x’ minority people online (see Aburime 2022). To provide a more concrete example, this might be an academic sharing an article about how a prominent celebrity uses language to construct transphobic ideologies – and then ‘gender critical feminists’ dogpiling that person (this has happened, for example, to academics such as sociologist Sally Hine; see also Marwick 2021 for a discussion of people’s experience of such targeted harassment outside of academia). This can be overwhelming for a researcher – especially if that person is an early-career researcher or has never come across such an incident before.

3 Current Systems to Protect Researchers

There are current ethical frameworks which are designed to protect researchers in language, gender, and sexuality studies (as well as cognate disciplines) from the perspective of mental health (see, e.g., Association of Internet Researchers 2020; BAAL 2021) and many of these frameworks advocate for ethical considerations a ‘case-by-case’ basis. Although I would argue such a way is the only way to approach any research topic (see Heritage 2022), it is also important to consider how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) more broadly will implement these ideas and the systems they put in place to protect researchers. In particular, there is a need to consider the kind of hostility people researching topics related to language, gender and sexuality may face.

Although previous work has discussed the protection of some marginalised communities within a higher education setting (see, e.g., Tuhiwai Smith 2006), less has been done to explicitly discuss protections for those researching gender and sexuality. In part, such a lack of discussion is likely due to many countries having legal protections for workers. However, given the increase in online hate towards people researching topics associated with gender and sexuality – including the use of language, I would argue that more systematic protection of our research community is needed. When dealing with distressing data back in 2019, I conducted an analysis of ethical application and guideline documents from 50 randomly sampled UK HEIs. I explored the faculties in which the linguistic departments were situated and searched for whether or not they had published their ethical guidance online. Of

⁵ Dogpiling is when multiple people with one particular ideology all message and harass a single person.

these 50 institutions, I was only able to find ethical guidelines and application forms for 32. From this reduced list, I could only find two which explicitly discussed researchers taking actions to protect their mental wellbeing. From this, it might be argued that there is a focus on protecting research participants, as opposed to the researchers themselves.

Although these findings paint a somewhat bleak picture, it should also be noted that researcher positionality and safety are topics which are rapidly changing, as evidenced by the existence of new initiatives and projects – such as the MASTERY project (see EUniWell 2023), which seeks to change how academics deal with ‘sensitive’ topics, including violence and death, harmful sexual behaviours, and sexuality. Although MASTERY is not focused on linguistics specifically, such a project has clear applications to those studying language, gender, and sexuality more broadly. However, the MASTERY project, and similar projects, are typically initiatives established by academics and funded by external bodies, as opposed to change coming from within higher management teams at HEIs themselves. Ultimately, this kind of projects highlight that there are systematic shortcomings for supporting researchers of language, gender, and sexuality – particularly around mental health and wellbeing.

4 Discussion: The Need to Change the System

While I have now discussed that there are systemic shortcomings related to the protection of researchers in language, gender, and sexuality, this section now turns to discuss the need to change current systems which constrict and/or prevent more revolutionary work in language, gender, and sexuality studies. One aspect which should be noted is that many of the scholars researching language, gender, and sexuality do so because they represent underserved or societally persecuted groups on the gender/sexuality spectrums, and they believe that approaching language with an emancipatory agenda may be one way to change society for the better. In other words, many people research areas related to language, gender, and sexuality because it directly affects how they interact with the world. These people, often from marginalised communities, must not only navigate systemic challenges in contexts where they are underrepresented, but in the case of those of us doing research on language, gender, and sexuality, must also navigate hostility from external forces.

Systemic change is needed within HEIs, and research institutions more broadly, to enable those interested in this area of research to 1) continue to flourish and produce highly rewarding, high quality research and 2) to remain safe – physically, emotionally, mentally, and digitally. Although some HEIs have started to include considerations for the mental health of the researcher on ethical application forms,

this needs to extend into the research culture at HEIs more broadly, and as a discipline, there is a need to acknowledge the current climate in which we conduct socio-linguistic and critical discursive research. The current climate and environment are somewhat hostile to those challenging gender-based hegemonies, and reactions based on this can ultimately harm researchers. Building on this point, for the health of language, gender, and sexuality studies, there is a need to ensure inclusive and supportive environments for all researchers, but especially early career researchers and those from under-represented backgrounds.

Furthermore, there are often guidelines and key metrics from HEIs which do not fully align with research objectives in language, gender, and sexuality studies. For example, some HEIs may insist on the use of inappropriate ethical guidelines (which are often written without linguists in mind). Some guidelines, for example, might require consent to use extant online data (see Heritage 2022 for a discussion of this). However, especially when being critical of groups (such as online misogynists), requesting permission to quote such data appears to be counter-intuitive (see also Fuchs 2018). While this point is not to disregard the need for ethical review and internal Ethical Approval, this kind of constriction on language, gender, and sexuality research (which is often not written by or reviewed by linguists) might become a barrier to the continuation of high-quality research. Elsewhere, goals, metrics, and frameworks from some HEIs might not align with ideals and goals of language, gender, and sexuality research. For example, some HEIs are particularly keen on people applying for – and winning – very large multi-million pound/euro externally-funded grants. However, there are only a limited number of these – and often, they are not explicitly or solely for work on language, gender, and sexuality. Indeed, if such projects are accepted by external-funders, they tend to be for projects which only involve language, gender, and sexuality-based analyses as a smaller component of the broader research agenda. While this might be beneficial because it could encourage inter-disciplinary thinking, and collaboration (which work in language, gender, and sexuality tends to be and do regardless of external funding bidding activity), such metrics may also lead to situations where language, gender, and sexuality scholars are less enabled to conduct the kind of research they are specifically interested in and may be stretching themselves across several tangibly related projects.

At this point, it is also worth returning to a common criticism of CDA studies: that although many linguistic scholars critique society, there tends to be less emphasis placed on activism based on our research (see Breeze 2011; Catalano and Waugh 2020). Indeed, given that language, gender, and sexuality scholars critique representations of gender and typically approach texts from an emancipatory agenda, it stands to reason that we should also be politically engaged and using our research to further activist goals. However, as points already raised in this short paper might

suggest, sometimes being an activist in a hostile environment can be both difficult and dangerous. There are several colleagues who might prefer to donate to activist causes in an anonymous capacity, work with equality movements on a more private basis, or do not publicise their activism at all. Indeed, this then also raises the question of ‘what actions are activist enough?’ – is, for example, using social media to post support for marginalised communities enough? Is marching in the street? Is activism defined by the donations one makes? This might then be compounded with issues such as whether or not a researcher has signed a non-disclosure agreement because we are working with private companies to change the way they use language.

Activism looks different to everyone, and so it can be difficult to operationalise the notion that those critiquing society should also be activists in changing it. This difference in what constitutes activist actions, in tandem with differences in visibility, can, understandably, lead to frustration on the part of people who the research might impact the most. While we must not forget that one of the reasons for doing work in language, gender, and sexuality studies is to bring about equality, we must also remember that we, as researchers, are only human – which comes with a myriad of considerations. However, something worth emphasising is that we are not replaceable – so we should not be compromising our health and safety. Ultimately, safety, mental health, and well-being should not be sacrificed in exchange for the privilege of doing research.

However, while I have raised the point that we should, ideally, engage with activism and ensure that our research is utilised to push for equalities based on findings in language, gender, and sexuality studies, we also need systematic changes in order to allow us to do this. As it stands, many workload allocation models at HEIs do not budget for activism and dissemination work based on research findings. One ethical concern which should be addressed, in addition to mental health challenges put on language, gender, and sexuality scholars, is that of workload allocation and the need to not become overworked.

5 Conclusions

This short article has been written out of concern for colleagues in the field of language, gender, and sexuality studies – as well as in related disciplines, such as gender studies more broadly. With the increased rates of hostility towards people who challenge gender-norms, many scholars may be somewhat concerned for their own safety. While I have raised this issue in relation to just one anti-feminist movement (the rise of the manosphere), I have also drawn attention to the work which has pointed to a lack of systemic support in place for scholars dealing with

such topics. Although several of the support systems required for researchers in language, gender, and sexuality studies could be applied to other disciplines, it is hoped that by highlighting the systematic shortcomings that constrain the development of the discipline, that affirmative action can be taken to facilitate continued excellence.

Research in language, gender, and sexuality is high-quality, but I also worry that systemic challenges, and a lack of facilitation of research, ultimately may have serious consequences for the field. There is a genuine ethical imperative not only to fight for systems that allow us to continue this high-quality research (and reward us for it too), but also to facilitate change which allows for deeper and more nuanced work in language, gender, and sexuality in greater detail.

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