

Working “With” Not “On” Disabled People: The Role of Hate Crime Research within the Community

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Abstract

For many disabled people, violence can become an unwanted, yet ordinary part of everyday life. Often, these crimes are attributed to understandings of disabled people as vulnerable and largely, passive victims. Attending to the aims of this special issue, this paper aims to dismantle these stereotypes and attend to the unique ways that disabled people can resist and respond to hate crime through creative and collaborative research practices. Building upon this, I argue that there is a pressing need for hate studies researchers to work “with” and not “on” those who have experienced targeted violence. Working in this way builds upon long-standing efforts of disabled activists and disabilities studies researchers to challenge reductive research practices by working in more collective and inclusive ways. To demonstrate this, I reflect upon a project working in partnership with disabled people to create a disability hate crime toolkit. The toolkit, now published, shares accessible and informative resources that can be used to raise awareness about disability hate crime. While the focus of this paper is disability, I consider methods of collaboration, co-production and participation that can be drawn upon by researchers to respond to hate crime and interpersonal violence more broadly.

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Conceptualizing Violence and Disability Hate Crime

Violence toward disabled people is prevalent. Disabled people are more likely than their non-disabled counterparts to experience domestic violence and/or sexual violence (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2019). Both domestic violence and sexual violence are also gendered: 5.7% of disabled women experienced sexual assault compared to 1.1% of disabled men, and 17.3% of disabled women experienced domestic violence compared to 9% of disabled men (ONS, 2019). Disabled victims of domestic abuse also typically experience violence for longer before accessing support, and are more likely than non-disabled people to continue experiencing abuse after receiving support (Safe Lives, 2017). Police-recorded disability hate crime continues to rise. Compared to 2020/2021, for example, when 9,690 disability hate crimes were reported to the police, this figure had increased to 13,777 in 2022/2023 (Home Office, 2023). Moreover, this rising figure continues to underestimate the prevalence of disability hate crime. Indeed, the latest Crime Survey for England and Wales (Home Office, 2018) estimated 52,000 incidents of disability-motivated hate crime in England and Wales annually.

Conceptualizations of violence, like hate crime, are by no means straightforward or consistent (Stanko, 2003). For instance, Walby et al. (2017) consider factors such as intention, harms, repetition and duration when assessing boundaries of violence to take into account the multiple expressions of domestic violence. Thapar-Björkert et al. (2016) recognizes that focusing only on physical violence and physical harms can underestimate the ways that symbolic violence “works on the body” with no single identifiable wound to heal. Similarly, Hollomotz (2013) argues that conceptualizations that reduce violence to physical expressions are limiting, and instead proposes a “continuum of violence.” This more holistic approach to understanding violence recognizes a multitude of incidents that can overlap and occur simultaneously. Disability hate crimes and disability hate incidents occur on this continuum, and are situated within a much broader set of exclusions and violence that create and reinforce barriers for many disabled people in their everyday lives (Roulstone & Mason-Bish, 2013).

While there is no single meaning of violence, Hollomotz (2013) notes that disabled people are typically excluded from such conceptualizations, and instead said to be victims of “abuse.” It is important within this chapter that all incidents of disability hate within the context of everyday life are considered within broader understandings of violence and therefore condemned. The ordinariness of hate crime is an important point to make. Indeed, hate crimes are not limited to extreme and engineered encounters, but very often occur within the “normal frictions of day-to-day life” (Iganski, 2008, p. 45). Disability hate crime is ‘is an unwelcome part of everyday life. Many come to accept it as inevitable, and focus on living with it as best they can’ (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011, p. 5). For many disabled people, disability hate crime can become a regular, mundane experience that does not neatly fit within the parameters of legal definitions of hate crime, or typical conceptualizations of violence.

The concept of disability hate crime encompasses a range of incidents and behaviors, including so-called “banter,” having photographs unknowingly taken and posted on social media (Wilkin, 2020), being spat at by strangers (Healy, 2020), name-calling, verbal harassment and bullying (Burch, 2021). The normalization of violence can prevent disabled people from recognizing and reporting these incidents to the police (Burch, 2020). Indeed, it is well known within the fields of hate studies and disability studies that disability hate crime is largely under-reported and under-recorded (Healy, 2020; Sin, 2015; Smith, 2015). Previous research suggests that under-reporting is an outcome of multiple factors, such as a lack of police awareness surrounding disability more generally (Sin, 2013), poor experiences of reporting to the police, such as receiving unhelpful responses or not being believed (Leonard Cheshire and United Response, 2022; Sheikh et al., 2010), and a lack of conceptual clarity regarding what does and does not constitute a criminal offense (Burch, 2021).

A long-standing critique of the criminal justice response to violence against disabled people relates to the notion of vulnerability. According to Roulstone and Sadique (2013, p. 26) there remains to be a “deep and avoidable confusion and potential injustice perpetuated by the legal misunderstanding of hostility and vulnerability as opposites” (See also Roulstone et al., 2011). The construction of disabled people as “vulnerable victims” can contribute to victim-blaming and questions surrounding the credibility of disabled victims (Williams and Jobe, 2024). In addition, pursuing a vulnerability response can result in criminal justice agencies pursuing safeguarding and adult protection measures as opposed to a rights-based, criminal justice response (Roulstone and Sadique, 2013). Therefore, it is proposed that any

simplistic connection between disability and vulnerability is inappropriate (Ralph et al., 2016) and there needs to be a shift within the criminal justice system to recognize that the perception of vulnerability is one compilation of, rather than distinct from, hate crime (Thomas, 2011). Recent work by Healy and Dray (2022) propose that changes implemented by The Care Act 2014 provides an opportunity for reconceptualizing perceptions of vulnerability. The Care Act 2014 replaces the term “vulnerable adult” with “adults at risk” and in turn, presents a move toward preventative measures as opposed to incident-led responses (Healy & Dray, 2022). Moreover, they suggest that the act encourages more multi-agency working that addresses safeguarding concerns while continuing to focus on a rights-based approach to seeking justice.

Chakraborti and Garland (2012, p. 506) support a move toward vulnerability within conceptions of hate crime more broadly. They argue that:

a vulnerability-based approach acknowledges the heightened level of risk posed to certain groups or individuals that can arise through a complex interplay of different factors, including hate, prejudice, hostility, unfamiliarity, discomfort or simply opportunism or convenience

Moving away from traditional perceptions of disabled people as inherently vulnerable, this suggests that “vulnerability is exacerbated through social conditions, prevailing norms and people’s reactions to ‘difference’” (Chakraborti & Garland, 2012, p. 509). Vulnerability, from this perspective, is situational and takes the sole focus away from individual characteristics (Hoong Sin, 2016).

The question of vulnerability is of particular interest within this article and the way in which this can contribute to an understanding of mutual interdependence. Often, to be deemed dependent is to be deemed vulnerable, and vice versa. Within disability studies, the notion of dependency “is simultaneously rejected (when it is used to denote human failing) and accepted (as a key aspect of what it means to be a human being living with others in the world)” (Goodley, 2021, p. 67). The rejection of dependency and vulnerability when thinking about disability is understandable given how this construction has historically been used to cast disabled people as unworthy and inferior (Oliver, 1989). Indeed, contemporary discourses surrounding disability and welfare dependency are argued to have created a ready climate for hostility toward disabled people (Garthwaite, 2011; Hughes, 2015; Burch, 2018). On the other hand, we can recognize that dependency is an innate part of living in the world with others (Goodley, 2021). The relationships that we have with one another and the world around us are never one-directional;

they are complex and dynamic. Recognizing these relationships can help us to think differently about the ways that we work with and rely upon one another, interdependently. Throughout this article, I reflect upon my own experience of working in partnership with a group of disabled people to produce a disability hate crime toolkit. In doing so, I argue that there are numerous possibilities that can arise from disability hate crime research when we work in collaborative ways, both within and outside of our academic circles.

In the following, I reflect upon my own positionality and discuss our accountability as researchers to work in partnership with others. I consider the history of disability research and the value that is attributed within disability studies to work in collaborative ways with disabled people. Following this, I offer more practical reflections on the process of working in partnership. I draw upon the disability hate crime toolkit as a case study for thinking about methods of engagement and co-production in practice. Finally, I offer some honest reflections that will be of interest to researchers interested in researching violence in ways that are collaborative and that are based upon the experiences of victim-survivors. In doing so, I suggest that new frameworks for responding to violence should foster collective interests and efforts.

Researcher Positionality

Between 2021 and 2023 I led a steering group of disabled people to produce a toolkit about disability hate crime. The need to develop a toolkit arose from my PhD research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/J500215/1) which explored disabled people's experiences of disability hate crime within the context of everyday life. I was the primary researcher on this project, am the sole-author of this paper and have led the toolkit steering group.

I am a white, young-ish, non-disabled and working class early career researcher working at the intersection of disability studies and hate studies. While my research draws upon wider disciplines within Social Sciences, such as sociology, criminology and health and social care, disability studies is my disciplinary home. Acknowledging my position as a non-disabled researcher within disability studies and the history surrounding this (See Barnes & Mercer, 1997), I try to ensure that my research practices are reciprocal and collaborative, and aim to challenge oppression (Inckle et al., 2023). I am open about my role as an ally when working with others and about my commitment to doing more work *with* disabled people rather than *about* disabled people. While my own role as a non-disabled researcher has largely been accepted, I have been met with resistance on one occasion when acting as a spokesperson about disability hate crime.

Reflecting upon researcher positionality is an important part of the research process (England, 1994). As researchers, we shape the research process throughout its entirety—through our approach to research and how we understand knowledge and to the ways in which we choose to work with, and present knowledge. Questioning the position that we are in, our intentions, and the values that we hold can be productively unsettling. Engaging with this discomfort can encourage us to consider the ways that we can ensure that the process is more empowering for those involved (Morris, 1992). In this article, I present an honest reflection of my own research practices working in partnership with disabled people.

Working in Partnership with Disabled People

Emancipatory research challenges traditional research relationships, whereby an individual researcher defines the approach, scope, methods and outcomes of a project. Emancipatory research or, as Walmsley (2001) has termed, “inclusive research” seeks “to create an environment in which disabled people are empowering themselves” and are at the forefront of decision-making (Stone & Priestley, 1996, p. 711). This approach provides an opportunity to redress traditional power imbalances within research that have cast disabled people as subjects of research with no input, to the development of research design (Watson, 2012; Zarb, 1992). In practice, this suggests that disability research should be led by disabled people themselves as opposed to non-disabled researchers. Thus, emancipatory research holds that disabled people are not simply included or “collaborating with” in the research process, but are actively involved with decision making throughout the entire lifespan of the project (Nind, 2017). This approach recognizes people with learning disabilities and disabled people as “equal partners” in the pursuit of research to change society in meaningful ways (Strnadova & Walmsley, 2017).

In practice, emancipatory and inclusive research are not yet the standard within disability studies or disability hate crime research more broadly. Even within this field, disabled people, and particularly people with learning disabilities, have typically been excluded from the research process as contributors and experts (Mikulak et al., 2022a). The rigidity inherent to the process of designing research, from applying to research funding, to data generation, can prevent authentic input from disabled people from the onset. In particular, the time needed to truly engage and work with (or be directed by) disabled people in emancipatory ways (Gilbert, 2004) can seem unrealistic within the relentless rhythms of academic research. This is particularly the case when developing funding bids which often adhere to strict academic guidelines and tight deadlines.

Although emancipatory research remains rare, there has been a welcome shift toward more participatory ways of working, which has been supported by an insistence of some funding bodies as a condition of research funding (Walmsley, 2001). Central to this shift has been a commitment to harness partnerships with disabled people and organizations that aims to place the voices and experiences of participants at the very forefront (Schubotz, 2020). Participatory research is about working in creative, collaborative and flexible ways, reflecting upon the types of issues we are passionate about, the kinds of knowledge that we seek to engage with, and the different ways that we work *with* people.

Participatory research has significant importance when researching disability hate crime and interpersonal violence more broadly and has been fundamental to offering alternative and more inclusive means of researching issues that are relevant to the lives of disabled people (Oliver, 1992). These approaches value the expertise of disabled people, and the importance of learning *from* lived experience of disability. Such approaches, which offer more creative and collaborative means of engagement, can inform new frameworks for researching and responding to violence. For example, arts-based methods, such as “mood-board” activities, audio diaries and photographs have been utilized to provide alternative ways of capturing the lived experiences and reflections of disabled people (Gibson et al., 2013; Burch, 2022). The collaborative use of “Snakes and Ramps” (an adapted version of the well-known game, “Snakes and Ladders”) has also been used to work with disabled victim-survivors of sexual violence to present their journeys of realization and access to support (Hollomotz et al., 2023).

Co-produced research has also gained traction. For example, Mikulak et al. (2022a) write about the co-production of training resources *for* and *with* people with learning disabilities. This work recognizes that inclusion in the research design and process should be supported by appropriate support, training and collaboration. Another notable example of co-production is the *Living Life to the Fullest* research project which consisted of a “co-researcher collective” including six disabled young women and three disability studies academics (See Liddiard et al., 2022). Throughout this project, online communication platforms such as Facebook, Skype, FaceTime, Email, and WhatsApp were used to communicate between the research team. In addition to this, arts workshops and a residential arts retreat engaged young people living with “life-limiting” or “life threatening” impairments in a range of performative and creative activities (Liddiard & Watts, 2022).

Collaboration with disabled people to determine project aims, design and outcomes can positively impact the research process. In the next section, I

consider the possibilities and challenges of working in partnership by reflecting upon my own practice of leading a disability hate crime toolkit steering group.

Collaboration in Practice: Introducing the Disability Hate Crime Toolkit Steering Group

The disability hate crime steering group is a collective of disabled and non-disabled people who have been brought together by a shared interest in, and commitment to, challenging disability hate crime. Most of the members had been involved in my PhD research, and asked to be included in any future research opportunities. Others were recruited through contacts that I had made during the PhD. All members of the steering group were affiliated with a disabled persons organization (DPO) or disability charity.

We collaboratively worked together over a period of around one and a half years to create a disability hate crime toolkit that can be freely accessed online by disabled people, organizations, professionals and bystanders. While I led the toolkit and brought the group together, the content evolved through discussions and meetings with the group. Now launched,¹ the toolkit provides practical support about what a disability hate crime is, how to report it, where to access support, and how to stay safe in the community. It also includes a training resource for police officers when working with disabled victims. To date, the toolkit has had over 2,000 views with visitors from 10 countries (the most common being the UK and USA). Many of the resources have been downloaded, with the most popular downloaded resources being about further support and police training. The toolkit has also helped to generate opportunities for further impact, such as ongoing collaborations with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), including sitting on their disability hate crime scrutiny panel, leading training sessions for prosecutors, and developing some new resources.

Many of the steering group members identify as having learning disabilities and have helped to ensure that the toolkit is available in accessible formats. The production of accessible resources also sought to challenge the use of unsuitable and inaccessible language within the criminal justice system that can cause communication barriers and prevent justice (Gormley & Watson, 2021; Keilty & Connelly, 2001; Spaan & Kaal, 2018). Early in the process, one member suggested that a glossary would be useful, to provide easy to understand definitions of some key terms that people might encounter when reporting or accessing the toolkit. We developed the glossary together, checking each definition for clarity.

Another way of improving accessibility was through the creation of easy-read resources as the standard, rather than as an alternative. Indeed, while an array of resources about disability hate crime exist, few of these are available as easy-read resources. Easy-read resources use plain English and include the use of illustrations, color and layout to make information easier to read and comprehend (Nomura et al., 2010 cited in Sutherland & Isherwood, 2016). The use of easy-read resources has increased over recent years, and in many cases, is marked out as an example of good, inclusive practice (Chinn, 2019a). However, Poncelas and Murphy (2007) propose that the addition of symbols to text does not automatically improve one's ability to comprehend information. Rather, comprehension of easy-read resources can depend upon the types of symbols used, whether disabled people are familiar with these symbols (Poncelas & Murphy, 2007) and the interactional practices accompanying their use (Chinn, 2019b). During our meetings, these visual resources provided a basis for discussion as opposed to being relied upon as a single source of information.

To develop easy-read resources, I initially used a free online information design service. This was largely based upon my own prior experience of using this service to create research material, and because it was freely available. However, members complained that the "cartoon" images were child-like and proposed Photosymbols as an alternative. Although Photosymbols is not free to use, there was a consensus that the photograph style symbols, which featured real disabled people, was more appropriate. Through university funding, I was able to purchase a subscription to Photosymbols² and use their photo library to create all resources. This funding allowed me to listen to the expertise of disabled people and respond to their feedback to create more appropriate resources.

Methods of Participation

Geographically, members of the steering group were based across England. Traveling to meet in person would have required additional funding, time, and energy commitments from steering group members. On the contrary, online platforms helped alleviate some of the barriers and restrictions that can exist for disabled people within physical time-spaces, and provided a free space to meet. Indeed, as Liddiard et al. (2019) note, engagement with virtual spaces provides the flexibility to access social, political, and cultural worlds. These virtual environments can therefore enable meaningful and co-led inquiry that might otherwise be hindered by a reliance on offline communication (Liddiard & Watts, 2022). However, these opportunities of engagement must be considered alongside the risk of digital exclusion (Miller & Heumen,

2021; Watling, 2011). Indeed, as research by Macdonald and Clayton (2013) report, digital and assistive technologies construct new forms of disabling barriers that are not as apparent within the offline world. These barriers, which could be applicable to many victims of interpersonal violence, include the cost of purchasing specific types of access technology and the inaccessibility of standard websites and online forms, which do not take into account diversity in visual and auditory acuity, or physical dexterity with a mouse (Watling, 2011). To help alleviate potential barriers and harness online technologies as a tool for engagement, we discussed the practicality of working together online as a group, including familiarity with host platforms and the timing of meetings.

Ensuring that meetings took place periodically at the same time and on the same day of the week provided consistency and helped to minimize disruption to the group's everyday routines. I set up a Doodle Poll with possible times and invited members to indicate their preference. We decided that meetings should take place once every 4 to 5 weeks to allow continued engagement and enthusiasm without being too demanding on members' time³ and energy.

We agreed to use Zoom to host our online meetings, as this was a platform that most members were familiar with due to use during Covid-19 (People First Dorset, 2021 cited in Mikulak et al., 2022b). Familiarity here was important and research suggests that this can be a key factor in building trust and rapport, particularly when conducting online research (Archibald et al., 2019). Moreover, Zoom has in-built accessibility features such as audio captioning, which allows some members to read and listen to the discussion. My own familiarity with Zoom was also helpful to guide members on how to use some of the specific functions.

Online meetings provided flexibility and the opportunity to participate from various locations. Members joined both from their own homes and from their workplace/DPO, or day center. Four members often joined the meetings from their DPO using the Zoom account affiliated with the organization. Others joined from their home using personal email accounts while one member joined through his work email as part of his professional role. One members' participation was facilitated by his carer as he did not have a personal email address or device to join the meetings. However, his carer was happy to provide her email address for the meeting invitations to be sent to, and ensured that he was able to join each meeting while she was supporting him from her own device.

The online methods used to facilitate this project are worth reflecting upon, particularly in the post covid-19 context whereby online engagement has become a safer and more comfortable means of communication for some

disabled people. Like Whitney-Mitchell and Evans (2022, p. 7) I strongly support “technologies as spaces ripe for human and affective connection, nurture and care, especially for marginalized people who experience barriers in the physical and social world.” Therefore, I would encourage other researchers working on interpersonal violence to consider the possibilities that technologies allow to work in more flexible and supportive ways with targeted communities.

Methods of Co-production

Liddiard et al. (2019) suggests that virtual spaces can enable more accessible and flexible means of co-production that serve to transform embodied and temporal frameworks of research production. Indeed, in their “co-researcher collective,” online modes of communication such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp had enabled friendships and mutual understandings to be harnessed among the group, with little or no face-to-face meetings (Whitney-Mitchell & Evans, 2022). Enthused by this research and the possibilities afforded by online communication methods, I similarly invited steering group members to virtually engage with one another and collaborate with the toolkit outside of our set meeting times. For example, I created a private Facebook group where members could talk with one another and share resources and ideas that could inform the development of the toolkit. I assured members that this was a closed group and that only those who were invited to join were able to see and engage with the posts. I also sent regular emails to steering group members before and after meetings, and asked for their feedback on draft resources. I believed that these online methods would enhance their opportunity to collaborate and actively inform the development of the toolkit. I also hoped that being able to receive feedback on toolkit resources over emails would enable me to address any issues prior to the meetings. In practice, however, engagement with these virtual spaces was almost absent. While some members joined the Facebook page, no-one posted here or replied to posts that I had added and I rarely received responses over email.

Practically, the use of online communication methods as tools for co-production did not fit with the way that members wanted to (or could) engage with the toolkit project. Upon reflection, asking members to engage with the toolkit in this way was potentially surpassing their expectations about the time that they were committing to the project. Indeed, while members were compensated for the time they spent engaging with online meetings, this was not the case for any additional engagement and communication. While I was originally worried by this lack of engagement outside of the meetings as a

failure to effectively “co-produce” and collaborate, I was reassured by the levels of contribution and overall enthusiasm during meeting times. Despite not having engaged with draft resources in advance of the meetings, members were keen to contribute and offer their feedback during our meetings, and were therefore actively involved with the development of the toolkit. When producing easy-read resources in particular, being informed by people with learning disabilities helped to ensure that information was accessible and useful, as opposed to tokenistic (Herron et al., 2015). Our pre-launch meeting was particularly insightful to gain feedback from their own experience of engaging with resources, with a key focus upon accessibility and usability. Upon discussing some of the key accessibility issues of each resource, we made important changes to the font, size of text, and background color across the site.

These dynamics of engagement call for a moment of reflection upon the ways that we, as researchers, might expect participants or those who we are working with to be involved with our research endeavors. While as an idea, the use of online communication platforms could have enabled the steering group to communicate and contribute outside of set meeting times, this did not work in practice. Thus, while we should continue to offer these modes of communication, particularly given that these methods can enable greater flexibility and time to get to know and support one another (Whitney-Mitchell & Evans, 2022), we should not assume, nor require, how, when and if these will be used.

Methods of Collaboration

Where it was relevant, members were keen to collaborate with relevant stakeholders outside of the initial steering group. This included another DPO, a local Hate Crime Coordinator, an Equalities Advisor, and a large charity for people with learning disabilities based in the North-West of England. Outside of this, I have also engaged with representatives from the Crown Prosecution Service, police officers, and members of the local council. Collaborating with these stakeholders provided an opportunity for people with professional experience to directly inform the resources, drawing upon their “insider knowledge” of various systems and procedures. For example, we worked closely with a local Hate Crime Coordinator and Equalities Advisor in the North-West to develop resources about the process of reporting hate crime. Together with the group, we wrote a script that discussed the process of reporting hate crime and recorded a short video which is included in the toolkit as a key resource. Steering group members were particularly keen for the development of this resource to provide clarity on the process of reporting and in particular, what happens once a report has been made. One member

reflected that this is the resource that they are most proud of across the toolkit. Similarly, one of our collaborators of this resource expressed “hope and confidence” that it would encourage people to report their experiences of hate crime to the police and to seek support if desired.

Working in collaboration with external stakeholders was important for steering group members to share their knowledge and experience. One group member reflected on this partnership as a “wonderful opportunity” to “partner with some wonderful people and learn from their knowledge and expertise.” Knowledge exchange is bidirectional, and it is important to recognize the ways that steering group members were able to educate others through this collaborative work. Indeed, while external stakeholders could educate the group on issues such as the reporting process and what support might be involved, it was equally valuable to explore how steering group members had themselves experienced this process. One collaborator (Equalities Advisor) commented that “it was interesting and informative to be involved in the development of the toolkit, and working with the steering group was really inspiring.” Listening to the lived experiences of group members provided context to the development of resources and identified some areas that could be improved in practice. Their experiences also helped to shape collaborative discussions and enabled external stakeholders to learn from their experiences.

Opportunities for further collaboration remain high on the agenda and some possible work is being discussed with key agencies within the criminal justice system. It is important to note, however, that while many opportunities for collaboration were discussed, they were unable to take place due to competing work commitments. For example, steering group members were enthusiastic about the possibility of working with the police to develop a training resource for police officers working with disabled victims. Given the widespread level of distrust in the police that many disabled people hold (Sin, 2013; Burch, 2021) the willingness to listen and collaborate would have suggested a desire to implement change and improve practice. Such a resource could have helped to improve levels of confidence. However, due to time and resource pressures within policing, and the difficulty in establishing the “right contact” within these services, it was not possible prior to the official launch of the toolkit. While it is hoped that the success of the toolkit may provide a platform for future opportunities and collaborations, this failure reflects some of the challenges of working in collaboration with multiple agencies.

Developing Meaningful Relationships and Shared Vulnerabilities

Despite my own concerns about creating a safe and supportive online space, we very quickly established meaningful relationships based upon our shared interest in disability hate crime. The regularity of meetings enabled members

to get to know each other over a period of time, and each meeting provided an opportunity to catch up, share exciting news, and discuss the continued project that we were collaboratively working toward. Video conferencing platforms such as Zoom still enabled personable relationships to be developed through visual and audio cues (Irani, 2019). Indeed, members of the group were keen to have their cameras on so that they could respond to one another through their facial expressions, supportive nods and verbal responses. In this way, members supported one another and were able to engage in meaningful discussion about their own, and others' experiences of violence.

It was the shared knowledge, understanding and commitment that brought members closer together, rather than relying on the physical proximity of an offline space. Indeed, the sensitivity of disability hate crime as a topic enabled a close connection between members to be established, despite the geographical distance. Discussions were embedded within personal experience; using these as the basis for thinking about the purpose and development of a toolkit. The sensitivity among members fostered an intimate online space that moved slowly as members listened to and supported one another. While at times, the online meetings were "chaotic" as members were all keen to contribute ideas and suggestions, moments based upon individual experiences were calming. We were moved by one another, and brought together through this shared understanding and commitment to challenge the injustice of disability hate crime.

The role of our emotions within research is widely recognized. Emotion work within interpersonal violence research can pose risks to emotional well-being. Vicarious trauma can occur where researchers engaging with particularly difficult topics can begin to experience trauma themselves (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Moran & Asquith, 2020). This can be particularly exacerbated for researchers who share similar identity characteristics (Pickles, 2022). Such trauma can develop physical and psychological symptoms, such as exhaustion, anxiety, and withdrawal (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Yet there are also possibilities that can arise when we embrace our emotional connections and responses to sensitive research topics (and more specifically, to one another) and allow this to inform the research process. In the following, I reflect upon some of these possibilities as they arose through shared vulnerabilities.

When talking about hate crime, our emotional responses circulated within the virtual room that we shared and there was a sense of closeness to one another during these emotionally heightened conversations. These conversations were productive because they were embedded within our emotions. They generated what Emerald and Carpenter (2015, p. 748) refer to as

“emotionally sensed knowledge,” that is, “knowledge sensed *through* or *by* emotion.” In this way, emotions helped to facilitate more meaningful discussion about hate crime as it brought the group together as a collective and allowed us to be vulnerable with one another. Embracing, rather than attempting to minimize our shared vulnerabilities demonstrates the value of *feeling* within our research. Based upon these experiences, it is important to challenge the binary construction that often positions emotionality in opposition to rationality, intellectual work and professionalism (Emerald & Carpenter, 2015). Feeling upset, or feeling empathy with someone else, can provide an opportunity to build supportive and productive relationships.

As already discussed, vulnerability is a particularly contested concept within both disability and hate studies, due to the way in which it has been conceptualized within the criminal justice system. However, I believe that recognizing our shared vulnerabilities, particularly as they arise through our research relationships with others, draws attention to our natural interdependency. Indeed, during the steering group meetings, we each allowed ourselves to become vulnerable with one another; to share our stories, feelings and reflections. In doing so, we depended upon and supported one another simultaneously. We embraced dependency and vulnerability to bring us closer together. To do so, Goodley (2021, p. 73) notes, “is to lean upon the potential of what makes us human. To lean on another offers and receives human contact and with it the replenishing qualities of dependency.”

In practice, when researching disability hate crime and violence more broadly, it is not possible (nor should it be desirable) to put aside or protect against our dependencies upon one another. We should instead recognize and embrace these emotional connections that enable us to not only understand hate crime as it exists within the context of everyday life, but to empathetically work with those who are targeted and with one another. Indeed, there is collective strength in shared vulnerabilities that can transform research practices to become more collaborative and more focused upon real life impact. Indeed, our emotional responses and shared vulnerabilities brought us together as a team with our shared interest in disability hate crime, and commitment to “doing something” together that could challenge this.

Reflections and Future Considerations

While I was running a workshop for my PhD research, a participant questioned the purpose of my research and what I hoped it would achieve. I explained that it was to explore disabled people’s understandings of disability hate crime within the context of everyday life. He argued that this was not enough. Rather than just “sitting at a table,” he believed that we needed to be

“out there, doing something” (Burch, 2022). He is, of course, absolutely right. From the very foundations of developing research aims and questions, we begin to position our research within the bigger picture. We identify a problem or a gap, and we design a piece of research that aims to address this. We write about this problem, and about how our findings contribute to a developing understanding of this. We might also provide recommendations or directions for future research. Yet research impact is situated far beyond this outcome; it is about using our research as a platform for enabling change. Interpersonal violence research should be about learning from the experiences of victim-survivors to develop shared understandings and practical solutions. The disability hate crime toolkit, both as a collaborative project and as a digital resource, was designed as a means of working toward this change collectively. As one member reflected, “it is moving to produce something at the end of it that we have all worked very hard on.”

In this article I have reflected upon collaborative practice to enhance the real-life impact of research on disability hate crime and considered some of the possibilities and limitations of this approach. I argue that collaborative practice can help to alleviate unequal power relations within the research process. As Inckle et al. (2023) have recently discussed, legitimacy in disability research should arrive not solely through our different body types and capacities, but through our engagement with non-disabling research practices. By attempting to work in partnership with disabled people, it is possible to rethink research relationships and the connections that can exist between researchers and participants. Indeed, working in partnership “with” values our interdependency with one another, while working “for” or “on” continues to position researchers and participants on opposing ends of the independent/dependent dichotomy. Such an understanding of research can readily be applied to the wider context of interpersonal violence to encourage researchers to adopt more collaborative research practices that relinquish control, place lived experience at the center, and importantly, harness the affective possibilities of our emotional responses to one another.

While participatory, collaborative research practices present a more equal means of conducting research and achieving research impact, it is important to recognize what these approaches also contribute, both to researchers and disabled people themselves. Working in collaborative ways can enable supportive research environments that foster our natural interdependency. As I have suggested, the disability hate crime toolkit was developed through shared discussion and reflection which was generated through our emotional responses to one another. Indeed, our emotional responses and shared vulnerabilities allowed us to see ourselves as a team, brought together with our shared interest in disability hate crime, and commitment to “doing

something” together that could challenge this. In addition, co-produced research produces richer data that is more relevant to the lived experience of disabled people (Mikulak et al., 2022a). Participatory research practices and collaborative research practices can also be empowering for those involved, providing an opportunity to increase confidence, have voice, and inform change (Bourke, 2009). Such approaches also hold researchers accountable as questions about our positionality help to shape and define the purpose of research. Finally, working in co-produced ways can encourage more flexible ways of approaching research. While online communication methods gained traction during the covid-19 pandemic, such methods can transform the extent to which disabled people (and marginalized groups more broadly) are able to participate with, and contribute to, research practices. Indeed, though the disability hate crime toolkit centers upon disability, it is important to recognize how the practice of working in collaboration can be harnessed within hate crime research more widely. Working in collaboration holds us accountable to those who are involved and ensures that lived experience of victims and survivors of interpersonal violence informs the process at every stage.

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Notes

1. To access the toolkit <https://disabilityhatecrimetoolkit.wordpress.com/>.
2. The annual subscription to Photosymbols was funded by the Center for Culture and Disability Studies at Liverpool Hope University.
3. Steering group members were reimbursed for their time in the form of vouchers. These vouchers were funded by the Center for Culture and Disability Studies.

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