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## Dangerous arms and everyday activism

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# Dangerous Arms and Everyday Activism: A Dialogue Between Two Researchers with Lived Experience of Self-Harm

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## Abstract

Using the format of dialogue, this paper is a collaborative exploration of navigating academia in self-harm scarred bodies. Prompted by the proposal of social media regulators to blur and ban self-harm scars, thus communicating such bodies as “dangerous,” our dialogue considers personal notions of activism, researcher identity, emotional labor, future potential, and the importance of finding and building communities for embodied solidarity. Structured as a single flowing discussion, the dialogue itself is (re)constituted from conversation, follow-up emails, and reviewer feedback. Explorations rely predominantly on personal experience and are supported in places by literature which has informed and shaped our ideas. In itself, this paper will be an “everyday act of defiance” in being seen, as well as advocating for spaces such as ECQI where meaningful connections can be instigated and maintained, and dialogues continued.

## Keywords

self-harm, everyday activism, dialogue, lived experience, academic identity

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## Introduction

*From: Fiona Stirling*

*To: Amy Chandler*

*Subject: FW: Special issue on Qualitative Inquiry as Activism: Call for Abstracts*

*Dear Amy, I was reading this call for abstracts and thought back to our “dangerous arms” conversation. I wondered if there was something we could write?*

On February 7, 2019, Instagram announced its intention to remove images of healed self-harm scars from searches and hashtags, and—potentially—to introduce blurring of people’s scars with sensitivity screens (Mosseri, 2019). This was a response to the suicide of a young person who had accessed self-harm and suicide imagery through the sharing platform prior to their death.

The 2019 European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ECQI19) was held 2 weeks later. I was presenting at a strand on self-harm and suicide, sharing an autoethnographic paper on my experiences of treatment for self-harm in accident and emergency. As a counselling lecturer and practicing therapist I have found the reflexive nature of my discipline aligns with, and is enhanced by, autoethnographic research methods. Still, the vulnerability it invites can be anxiety provoking; I spent the hour before my talk rolling my sleeves up, then back down, unable to settle on how best to present my body and its scars to a room full of strangers.

I arrived and met Amy for the first time. She was chairing the session and presenting a collaborative study piloting the use of arts-based workshops to explore meanings of self-harm. Amy has been researching and working on self-harm for many years as a sociologist and qualitative researcher. This was her first “arts-based” project, a collaboration with arts therapist Dr. Zoi Simopoulou. It was exciting to hear the ideas which emerged from their inquiry and by the end of the hour, it seemed we held similar motivations in our research activities. We began to talk.

Our lived experiences of the practice of self-harm provided quick access to common ground, accelerating the depth of our discussion. Conversation turned to the recent Instagram censorship headlines. While their press release made efforts to acknowledge the complexity of the situation, the decision appeared reflective of wider societal expectations for self-harm scars to be concealed, signaling the self-harm scarred body as dangerous or threatening to public safety and something to be “othered” (Lewis & Hasking, 2019). Our own bodies, to our amusement and frustration, fell within this remit; we each possessed—by their scarred nature—“dangerous arms.”

Revisiting this initial discussion provides an opportunity to consider how we challenge and resist such discourses through our everyday practice in academia. By arranging the body of this paper as a dialogue we are able to both meet the Special Issue call for imaginative and creative form, and (re)present our shared discussion, combined knowing, and collaborative exploration as it began.

In exploring his own collaborative practice, Gale (2018), drawing on Deleuze, highlights collaboration not as working together, but as “working between-the-two.” Dialogue offers the opportunity to make more transparent this “between” process. The disruption of a single narrative (Norris & Sawyer, 2012) also actively invites the reader to join the conversation, extending engagement (Breault, 2016). Dialogue further serves to communicate some of the playfulness and comradeship in our interactions, thus situating the practice of self-harm beyond the pathological to the human every day.

Structured as a single flowing discussion, the dialogue itself is (re)constituted (Kidd & Finlayson, 2015; Emmel & Clark, 2011) from a recorded and transcribed conversation, follow-up emails, and reviewer feedback. This co-construction encouraged us to reflect both together and independently on emerging themes, and the questions we wished to pose to one another (Kracen & Baird, 2018).

Our dialogue considers personal notions of activism, researcher identity, emotional labor, future potential, and the importance of finding and building communities. Explorations rely predominantly on personal experience and are supported in places by literature which has informed and shaped our ideas. While personal experience is accepted as important—central, even—to understanding self-harm, the position of research drawing on personal experience through a range of qualitative methods remains marginal within “self-harm research” as a whole. Indeed, the position of personal experience within mental health research (and here we contentiously, tentatively associate self-harm with “mental health”) is incredibly contested (Broer & Chandler, 2020; Chaney, 2020; Rose, 2020). Research that draws more directly and unapologetically on personal experience on the part of *researchers*, as we do in the dialogical approach we take here, is even more marginal. Thus, in itself, this paper will be an “everyday act of defiance” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000) in being seen as well as advocating for spaces such as ECQI where meaningful connections can be instigated and maintained, and dialogues continued.

## Dangerous Arms: Starting a Dialogue and Situating Activism

**Amy:** The first thing I have as a question is that we might explore “dangerous arms” as *not* activist. What if they are *not* dangerous or, perhaps worse, mundane? Could scarred arms fading into the background be in itself a form of activism? This comes I suppose from my experience, thinking about my experience of having my scarred arms visible, and mostly nobody says anything. We can be here in these spaces where sometimes people think these bodies should not be there... I was trying to think about what this activism thing actually means.

**Fiona:** “The activism thing...” it doesn’t sit naturally with me. It was only at the conference in February that the word arose, and people seemed to be—it felt like everyone around me was saying “Yes, we’re activists.” Are we? I couldn’t see it, I’ve never framed myself that way. I’ve never framed what I do that way. But when we had our initial discussion, I thought actually we probably could apply some of the concepts to it in that we’re trying to make change.

**Amy:** Is that what activism is then, making change? Similarly it's not a word I've ever massively applied to myself. It feels like activism should be something big. And collective. The big statements and the collective aspects. The idea of doing this paper together, and actually just the meeting we had at the conference, individually we might be doing these things but it becomes something different when we're both aware and maybe that's more "activist."

**Fiona:** I was pretty relieved to read that "activism is not well defined, so different people often have somewhat different ideas of what constitutes activism" (Martin, 2007b) because I think talking to you I'm actually figuring out what activism is to me—to *us*. At ECQI, it wasn't initially a word I could apply to myself but suddenly the energy of it, it was like I could start to persuade myself. I think the word brings with it some odd connotations, that it is disruptive in some way, which for me I think is being naughty and I don't want to do that, I want to be well behaved!

**Amy:** That's ooh... ok. Not wanting to break the rules and certainly not wanting to be seen as kind of doing something naughty... but it's that question, is having scars naughty?

**Fiona:** It can feel that way! When I was regularly self-harming, part of that was because expressing my negative emotions seemed disruptive or naughty, and therefore the easiest way forward was to hurt myself. To process the feelings in the simplest way. Which doesn't make sense, because hurting yourself is actually an incredibly disruptive act. Does any of that ring familiar?

**Amy:** It absolutely does. I think this is one of those moments where you can share an understanding of it and it becomes less disruptive. That description of self-harm as dealing with something without disrupting actually, for me that was quite an important part of the whole process; it avoided a lot of disruption, or at least attempted to (Brossard, 2014).

**Fiona:** Yeah. You can carry on your day and function at whatever level you're trying to.

**Amy:** It avoided interpersonal tensions which might make feelings worse. A way of not dealing with things, attempting to not be disruptive, which ties into the discomfort then of it being seen as disruptive. This leads back to the seen and the visible. It becomes disruptive when it is seen. If it's hidden and nobody knows about it, it's not disruptive.

**Fiona:** So the activism could be in allowing ourselves to be seen? That would align with what Baumgardner and Richards (2000, p. 283), call "everyday acts of defiance."

**Amy:** Potentially. The point I made at the start about visible arms potentially being just mundane and in the background and not noticed, but there is something different for me in being open about that experience in the academy. There is something different somehow between owning the experience and naming it with words, and owning it by being seen. That's the difficulty—it's not a show, you're not waving your arms around saying "look at my arms." They're just there, they're visible. Though at the start of my career it wasn't on show; it was something I very carefully hid even though

in my work I was writing about it. I've gone through that transition of becoming more visible, even if it's mostly not noticed!

**Fiona:** Could you say a bit more about that transition?

**Amy:** It was very subtle and it was partly from a discomfort I had doing public engagement type events talking about research around self-harm. One of these was in 2014, and I wanted to make sure there were different kinds of people talking. There was me talking as a researcher, and others talking as experts by experience, and there was a divide because I'd never named my experience in these public contexts. People would come up to me at the end and say, "your research is great, you just totally get it!" I began to say to people "well yeah, I've done it, that's partly why I get it." I didn't want to say "yeah, I'm just so excellent at research!" There was also a discomfort of other people taking on the labor of being open about their experiences. So it's two things—me not saying or showing anything was reaffirming this distinction between "the researcher" and "the person with lived experience," and also I was allowing that work of being open to be done by other people.

**Fiona:** I like that you describe it as a labor, because I've always had a problem with "the extra burden of heavy lifting" (Hartley, 2016) those in roles such as experts by experience are expected to take on. When I walk into a space, I'm undercover, that's what it feels like. I'm a secret agent. I can present myself as an academic and I'm respected in a different way. I can choose what to disclose or not but the minute they step in the door they are "the lived experience person" and have to defend their knowledge. I feel guilt for that. Huge guilt.

**Amy:** Absolutely. Guilt is an appropriate word for it. I've always felt a bit uncomfortable generally that I'm making money from my experiences, which led me to this research in the first place, which got me a stable job. I'm drawing on other peoples' stories. I take their stories, I do these clever things with them, and I've got a stable job out of it. I could have done all of that without being open about my experiences as well, so it feels wrong.

**Fiona:** But you made the choice *not* to do that. You've tried to make your own space within it informed by your personal experience of the topic.

**Amy:** Tried to. Yeah. It's been very much a back and forth with how best, because there is no best way to do it. Even doing this paper can feel uncomfortable because you're like, "look at me, look at my experiences" whereas in my work I try to acknowledge my experiences without putting them center stage.

**Fiona:** Price (2011, p. 8) suggests that the academy rejects anything which might be considered mental illness because it doesn't sit with rationality, so engaging with that center stage despite the discomfort might be the best way to disrupt and move toward "a more inclusive, and thereby enriched, academe." I'm finding myself thinking now about the role of our experiences of self-harm because when we started our conversations it was very much about our bodies, the physical visibility, and what that meant in academic spaces; but through our discussions, we have begun reflecting further on the ways we use our experience to inform our research practice. The latter are explorations of knowledge production, while the former is more about the ethical

tensions of an ambivalent desire to exist without concealment. Both have implications for this “center stage.” Do you remember the first time you put it on paper?

**Amy:** God no. No, I don’t think so. Do you?

**Fiona:** No! I feel like I should know somewhere because there must have been that choice between “not said this before” and “I’m gonna say it.”

**Amy:** But would you have said it first in writing?

**Fiona:** Hmm, I definitely would have spoken it first, verbally test the water.

**Amy:** Exactly.

**Fiona:** Again, that feels like a privilege, to be able to dance around the topic and be in rooms where you know people are not going to judge you. Do you think it played a part in your undergrad?

**Amy:** This is a well-rehearsed story for me, and one of the things that prepared my thinking for this discussion. Two weeks ago, I was at a conference on suicide and self-harm that’s very psychological and quantitatively focused. At the evening meal, I was sitting with other researchers and the question is “what brought you to this line of research?” It gets asked a lot, and I’ve got two stories. One is “I did my undergrad dissertation on it because there was no sociology on it, and that helped me pick my PhD.” The second story adds a little bit more embellishment, and I share that “I’ve done it myself. So it’s certainly connected. I never would’ve chosen this topic otherwise.”

**Fiona:** How do you choose which story to give?

**Amy:** Historically I’d be more likely to give the one where I don’t say anything about my lived experience. Depending on the context—but a lot of the time I would have left it out. Particularly at a conference like that. Nowadays, for the last few years, I make a point of saying it—however uncomfortable it might feel. Maybe that’s my activism?

## **Influencing Change: Mundane Visibility and Breaking Bubbles**

**Fiona:** That’s your activism! Vivienne (2016, p. 1) writes about everyday activism as “the sharing of personal stories in public spaces with the aim of challenging the status quo,” a slow and steady diffusion of knowledge for social change. Do you think it makes a change, when you say it?

**Amy:** It’s really hard to tell. I’m not sure. Maybe. I think partly I don’t want to know. I don’t say that and then look to see how they’re responding, I just say it and move on. So again, actually it’s about it being mundane and normal part of who I am. At a recent conference, I was asked to talk about qualitative methods and so I did, but I also shoehorned my experience in. It wasn’t really what I was talking about, I had my supervisor’s voice in my head saying “do they need to know? Is it necessary for them to know?” and increasingly my answer is “yes, it is important they know.”

**Fiona:** Why?

**Amy:** The mundane visibility I think. It shouldn’t be a big thing, but it just needs to be named sometimes. Not even sometimes. I just want to put it there. That’s about all

of those things—I'm not relying on other people doing that labor; some of that should be mine because I've benefitted so much from doing this. It's also about feeling a responsibility for younger people who are coming up, for them to hear this space is being inhabited by somebody who has experience that you might have too and that's ok, so you've got a future if you want to carry on doing this.

**Fiona:** That's that word again. Mundane.

**Amy:** It's one of my favorite words!

**Fiona:** Why?

**Amy:** I get really irritated by the framing of self-harm as this really dramatic and sensational act; it really pisses me off. The scars related to my self-harm are there forever now, so they have to be mundane—it would be really exhausting if I had to be dramatic about it all the time!

**Fiona:** I spoke to some of my students about my scars; they said at first they didn't even notice them. When they did notice, they were a little bit freaked out, but after a few weeks they'd forgotten. It went full circle. So actually, the power was when it became nothing again. When it became mundane. It didn't need to be a thing, it just was. I was just Fiona.

**Amy:** I'm wondering how that plays out for Instagram, which is one of the reasons we're talking about this. Which I think has actually gotten worse, since we spoke. I saw someone talking about having self-harm scars being blurred out, which is the opposite of it going to the mundane and fading into the background. There's a half-thought there about how important it is for self-harm to just be visible and for that to be ok and not a big deal. And the response from some seems to be that there's a fear somewhere about contagion, that normalizing it will mean that people just start doing it.

**Fiona:** Without some "normalizing," there's a feeling that if you have scars there is nowhere to go. Because there's nothing visible in the world. I can't think of a single person on TV that I've ever seen with self-harm scars. Unless it was a really dramatic Hollyoaks storyline. But I also get it, I was a secondary school teacher for a while and I never showed my scars. And I still wouldn't now.

**Amy:** Why not?

**Fiona:** I think it's the discourse that comes with that environment—you're around children, don't disturb the children! There is still plenty of language around self-harm which encourages conceptualizing it as "contagious" (Lewis & Hasking, 2019). I wasn't out as gay either.

**Amy:** I was thinking about keeping yourself safe. This might be more about my own experiences of high school as unpleasant but I was thinking about it being seen as weakness.

**Fiona:** Yeah. Not sharing anything which makes you potentially vulnerable. If I think about it, that would've been a really powerful place to be open, but I just couldn't. Millard (2020, p. 12) draws on Judith Butler to argue that "one's self is always crafted with the resources available, within the contexts and conventions operation at the time." In a school environment, it seemed impossible to craft myself as anything out

with the norms expected. As soon as I stepped into academia, there was much more freedom.

**Amy:** That's a useful way of thinking about it actually, the contexts in which we can do these things. There's a lot to it, the privilege of being in academia and it being a freeing space. Being able to do small acts of disturbing people, but it also underlines I suppose—this is me being pessimistic—the futility of it. The activists in the academy, but nobody gives a shit. You know? It literally doesn't matter to most people who don't have a clue what we do and don't care.

**Fiona:** Yeah, if I spend days thinking about having my arms out at a conference, how many people are going to be there that it impacts? Other academics? Where's the realness?

**Amy:** Except, two things there. One, small acts of activism can have big, ripple-y effects. And the other is that academia is still the real world. It's *a* real world.

**Fiona:** I consider it real, but I consider it a bubble.

**Amy:** It is, there are many bubbles though. Probably some of the work we should do is about breaking or blurring the lines of those bubbles.

**Fiona:** I guess we come back to what Vivienne (2016) said about everyday activism being this slow diffusion of social change... we have the bubble where we produce knowledge, how do we promote that diffusion into other bubbles?

**Amy:** You can force it a little bit, and it's deeply uncomfortable, but the event I'm doing tomorrow we've got a complete mix, some who are working in the "real" world are going to come to hear me blather about self-harm and art for 4 hr. That's a moment where there's potential. I will be owning my lived experience as well, and I don't expect that to be a big part of what's being discussed, but it's going to be present. Even if people only take tiny bits of that and it informs how they respond to the next person they work with, that is change. And that's me forcing it. I didn't have to do that. I could have not written that into the funding application and just written some journal articles. I would have been much happier doing that, in some ways. But I would also have been deeply dissatisfied with myself. There's something there about duty and responsibility to try and open it up.

## The Scarred Body: Authenticity and Deliberate Acts

**Fiona:** So, authenticity.

**Amy:** Yes.

**Fiona:** You were saying it's important to you.

**Amy:** It's important to lots of people I think. But I have a problem with it. In terms of what it means and if we can actually be authentic. So when you were talking about the students feeling you were authentic because you were open about your scars, for me—feel free to come back on me on this—it draws on this idea of self-harm as trying to access authenticity, and also that self-harm is often hidden so somehow if we are showing it, it is meaningful. Or it can be read as meaningful. We've said how actually it's quite mundane, it blends into the background—sometimes we're just hot and need

to take a cardigan off. Not to dismiss it, because if you are in the habit of hiding your scars, which I was for many years, then it does become something revealing when someone sees them for the first time. Something about that transition from very carefully hiding them all the time, to trying to be just ok about it. The full circle to when you just don't think about it anymore. I can see why people would grasp at words like authenticity and truth and "the real you" but I'm not sure it is. It's just a different you; what real you is there ever? You're always a different person with different people, and people will always read you in different ways, not always the way you want them to, and the way you want them to isn't necessarily the real you! That's why I have a problem with it. Because I'm a sociologist.

**Fiona:** I think I have a problem with it because why should my body, or parts of my body, make me more real? Because my body is different I'm interpreted as a realer person, a truer person, a braver person.

**Amy:** Brave one especially.

**Fiona:** You're so brave.

**Amy:** I'm just hot!

**Fiona:** You used that word "transition." From hiding to deciding to show your arms—unless you're just hot—to forgetting they're even there. It's almost like that transition starts again every time I walk into a new room. It's not like I do it once, and think "I'm out now." Every time I walk into a space I have to make that decision, do I roll my sleeves up or not?

**Amy:** When you said that, it made me think that these are moments of quiet activism. It's repeated. There are multiple opportunities, and every time you go to a new setting there are those choices to be made. We talked earlier about how my PhD supervisors knew about my self-harm, and I remember having conversations about what should I say in presentations? And their view was it should be on a need-to-know basis. And that actually guided a lot of my quietness on the issue for the first few years of my doctoral career, but I remember writing in my field notes that they didn't get that it wasn't just about me "not saying." It was about what I wore. At that point, I covered up, but they were basically telling me what to wear. They didn't know that, they didn't realize that, but they just didn't think about it. The fact that it isn't just about what I say...

**Fiona:** It's about how you move through the world.

**Amy:** Exactly. So my question, you say you have to make a decision every time you go into a space. Do you know how you make that decision?

**Fiona:** I think I do... a lot of it is how safe I feel. I can usually tell how anxious I am by my clothes. Especially if I'm somewhere new, or feeling a bit intimidated, sleeves will be down. As soon as I start to feel comfortable, sleeves roll up. And it's not like I say, "I feel comfy now, sleeves come up" it's that I look down and realize. Can you call it activism if it's unintentional?!

**Amy:** I think there's habits in it. In my younger days, there was a very ingrained habit to hide. It wasn't a decision. Just all of my clothes were very carefully bought to ensure that they covered me. Then in that process where I started to transition, I started

getting out of the habit, and it felt very strange for the first time as a grown-up to wear short sleeves in the summer! It was a bit of a revelation.

**Fiona:** Can you leave the house without a shirt in the bag or—

**Amy:** Yeah. Since my early 30s, over a 5, 6, 7 year period. Again, maybe this is more of an activist thing. I feel a bit more bolshy about it, I'm just like "don't care." I don't think it was ever a moment of making that decision. It was a slow process of getting out of the habit, realizing I could feel comfortable, that I didn't care actually. Probably enforced actually by the lack of response. I'd been so careful, hiding myself for two decades and nobody gives a shit. Nobody chased me down the street with a pitchfork. Mostly people just don't notice. I'd tested out a few times having short sleeves when I was doing bar work and stuff, but I stopped because people *would* just ask me things like "so how have you managed to stop?" or "I do that too, how have you dealt with it?" and I was just like, "I'm working, I don't want to have this conversation with you, and also, what makes you think I've stopped?!"

**Fiona:** Because you're showing it!

**Amy:** Exactly! Of course that's what makes them think I've stopped, but that doesn't mean I'm not still struggling with it.

**Fiona:** I think that's key; I still want to do it. It's hard work, it's effort. But because I talk about it and write about it, it's assumed it's not a problem anymore, that I've somehow mastered or conquered it. It's not that kind of relationship. It's not a black and white cessation issue (Lewis & Hasking, 2019).

**Amy:** It's one of the downsides of being in that professional role, having it as your job, the thing you research and know about. It doesn't make it easy, necessarily. No easy answers whatsoever. Don't know why I'm doing it really!

**Fiona:** Well, that's an interesting question—why are we doing it?

**Amy:** What we bring is different questions, a different orientation to the topic which shifts how it can be seen and how it can be understood, which is important. It is important. Because otherwise bits are missing. It doesn't mean other perspectives aren't also important and relevant because they are, and we will miss things or censor them and there are multiple stories that can be told about it (Chandler, 2016). It's not about bringing our experience as a "sure foundation" (Millard, 2020), but as a lens to what otherwise might be missed or obscured. I attend more, in data I generate with others, to these more mundane aspects of it. The lived experience of self-harm, for me—and it feels for lots of people who I speak to—has moments of drama of course, but a lot is the small, quiet feelings and sensations that do become part of the pattern of your life.

**Fiona:** I'm reminded of what Myerhoff (2007) said about telling your story to define and create yourself, a preferred identity. It's a transformational experience, having your experiences witnessed. I see a strong vein of witnessing in your work.

**Amy:** It sounds trite but what we also bring is, if we're talking about bodies and visibility, there is something different that brings as well. Because of the nature of it, of self-harm. It is more visible. Bringing that visibility into the room, actually into room, as well as just saying it. It brings something.

**Fiona:** So it's like what our bodies bring with our words, as a whole package?

**Amy:** Yeah, but it's a package that—we're going to take this metaphor too far—which may or may not be open. And that's that thing around acts of activism. Those bits we could choose not to show or share at all. So it makes it a deliberate act.

**Fiona:** When you ask yourself the question “should I do this?” saying “yes” is the activism.

**Amy:** I think it is. And I think it's about being able to say it without too much hesitation, though being able to say it at all is great. The act of saying “yes” is working toward a world where you can say “of course,” and then the question becomes more like “How do we do it then?”

**Fiona:** Do you think you're there?

**Amy:** More than I was. What I would like, which I think is happening, is for people who are coming through their early lives as academics are able to do that. And I think they are in many places, but not everywhere. Who knows what kind of questions they're asking themselves?

## Being “Out” in the Academy: Activism and Public Feeling

**Fiona:** Someone asked me recently about the imposter stuff, asked when does it go way?

**Amy:** Never! There's been some really interesting writing recently, in a book edited by Taylor and Lahad (2018) that tries to unsettle some of these ways of thinking about imposter syndrome. Breeze (2018) has a chapter in there called “Imposter Syndrome as Public Feeling” which is great—it really challenges the idea that we should just accept feeling like imposters, and maybe even embrace it as a resource for action and agency! I think Breeze's approach is really relevant to what we're talking about here in terms of collective action/activism. I mean I remember feeling reassured to hear that it's ok to feel like an imposter, I remember hearing it from professors. I think imposter syndrome is really meaningful in terms of our core topic of scarred arms as activism, because part of the fear and danger for me is that you'll be delegitimized.

**Fiona:** Delegitimized as...?

**Amy:** As a researcher, as someone who has anything to say. That was one of my concerns early on, that people would say you're just... that whatever I had to say would be worthless or meaningless. At the time I was just starting out trying to develop an identity as an academic and I didn't really inhabit that identity for years after my PhD. That's quite powerful, the potential of that.

**Fiona:** Do you think academia is generally a challenging environment for people to negotiate identity, or is it particular to academics with lived experience?

**Amy:** I think this raises some tricky issues about what we are referring to—and what is being read—when we talk about “lived experience.” Lived experience of what? Are we focusing here on self-injury? In which case I think we can recognize that there are academics without this particular lived experience. While of course we all have mental health, and everyone has their ups and downs, this is not necessarily the

same as those of us who carry visible scars “that look like self-harm.” Going back to Breeze’s work, she writes about “feminist ambivalences of being ‘within and against’ university institutions ... both complicit with and struggl[ing] against the neoliberal university” (p. 193); but she acknowledges how these tensions and challenges are different, perhaps more acute, for those inhabiting other identities and bodies—Black, brown or disabled bodies and, maybe for our purposes, scarred or (possibly) “mad” bodies. I’m really conscious of this though in terms of intersecting identities and oppressions that might allow us to navigate being “out” in the academy more smoothly: our whiteness, our class, maybe even our gender. This brings us back, I think, to some of what we were talking about earlier—about feelings of responsibility and duty to be “out,” as a way of almost trying to smooth the way for others, to make it more mundane to inhabit scarred or otherwise “different” bodies in academic and other spaces.

**Fiona:** But by highlighting this as “difference” are we moving further away from the mundane?

**Amy:** Millard (2020) writes about just that, that implying difference and distinction perversely plays into the idea that people who have experienced mental illness are “different”—contributing to stigma. But he also notes the power of collective expressions of experience, which is perhaps more where we are going in this article actually—the value of collectively sharing and being and showing something as a “powerful act of solidarity and courage” (Millard, 2020, p. 13). There is something about recognition, community, and solidarity among people with a particular—stigmatized—experience that is powerful and important, even if carried out in mundane, “quiet” ways.

**Fiona:** I get the sense it didn’t feel like you could be “out,” even in quiet ways, very early in your career?

**Amy:** Certainly when I was doing my PhD that was not how it was. I saw a presentation toward the end of my PhD by Martin (2007a) on her book *Bipolar Expeditions*. An anthropological study of bipolar in the US which also incorporated and integrated her experiences of being diagnosed and treated for bipolar. This was one of the first times I’d actually seen a bigshot academic name their own experience with mental illnesses part of who they were, but also part of their academic practice. It was like, “oh” Now it seems there are more people out there who are doing or have done that. Often it is people who are more senior or established—Emily Martin was a very well respected anthropologist. She still is—people didn’t turn round and say “you’re mad, we’re not listening to you anymore.” But I think it’s quite different making those decisions when you’re in your early career.

**Fiona:** Absolutely, yeah. Marsha Linehan, who was influential in developing dialectical behavioral therapy for treating borderline personality disorder (BPD) only started to become open in the last few years about having a BPD diagnosis herself. She waited until she was top of her game to disclose it publicly.

**Amy:** So only then. I think probably we’re at the start of people at all stages being open and that being ok. It’s more advanced—if we’re going to view it as progress—in some subjects rather than others. Hearing Chaney (2020) talk about it in History, there

are all these ideas about objectivity that are still there—not for all history, not all historians! But different disciplines are responding differently to different ways of knowing. It makes me wonder how different things could have been for me doing a PhD if I'd been open, visibly open from the start, and been able to connect in with this. Because it's the collective aspect of it which feels transformational. It's one thing doing small acts, making scarred arms visible, but also there's something about a few people doing it and it then becoming normalized. This is ok. It's ok for us to be here.

## Conclusion: Toward Embodied Solidarity

Perhaps the most meaningful point in our collaborative [...] practice was in those moments of sharing, when we were all deeply feeling, understanding, and connecting with each other's experiences. (Geist-Martin et al., 2010, p. 8)

I've been surprised, as I always am, by the power of hearing and sharing experiences—of how it can shape, reshape, and create new meaning and understanding. A few weeks after we began our discussions I was packing for a weekend away and found myself recollecting Amy's description of disrupting the habit of wearing long sleeves. I pulled the jumpers back out of my bag and holidayed for the first time in years with my scars visible. I have also noticed changes in my teaching and therapeutic practice, an awareness of my individual power and collective potential as an "activist."

Throughout our dialogue was an exploration of such activist identity. Bobel (2007) raises the possibility of resistance between "doing activism" and "being activist"—how one might do activism without taking on the collective identity of "activist" and the associated social movement. Bobel proposes that such resistance can be due to the "perfect standard" attributed to activists, "an identity constructed by unrealistic, even romantic, notions of the omniscient, tireless and selfless individual" (p. 157). Through our discussion, an ambivalent relationship to the title of activist emerged, an identity to which we are at once unworthy, and reject as unsuitable. It seems disingenuous to conflate our individually variable everyday conceal/reveal choices with marching upon Westminster. We reject it because of the precarious position of our lived experience, of how we associate our bodies disrupting the social sphere with responses of moral judgment, rejection, and unwanted inquiry. Further, there is the tension between "being seen" as a deliberate act, and simply inhabiting our bodies.

Yet, we cannot help but disrupt in everyday ways, so intrinsic it is to our shared value of social justice; a felt duty to expand the research landscape for self-harm, to have a fair distribution in the labor of sharing experience, and to lay foundations for other academics who share lived experiences that *may* be deemed "unsettling," including but not limited to carrying self-inflicted scars. The result is a pattern of what we consider to be quieter and personally resonant disruptions, such as mundane visibility. This offers us ways to do activism without necessarily being activist, of resisting the

narratives of “dangerous” thrust upon our bodies without negative connotations of “drama.

In order to embrace their potential as agents of change, Gergen (2015) suggests researchers work in ways which create the future they wish to see, implementing practices which inspire change and knowledge through praxis. The process of creating this dialogue has achieved such future focus by transforming individual to social, and bringing critical awareness to our activist status. While it remains to be seen where we might progress from here, the concept of embodied solidarity (Hodge, 2018; Shilling & Mellor, 1998) might be suggested for uniting felt experiences of being (for the) “other” in the academy—a resource to be embraced for action and agency.

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