

# ‘Maybe I’m a quiet activist’: Sex work scholars and negotiations of ‘minor’ academic-activism

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/sex](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sex)**Mary Laing**  and **Ian R Cook** 

Northumbria University, UK

**Tom Baker**

The University of Auckland, New Zealand

**Octavia Calder-Dawe**

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

**Abstract**

With the intensification of calls for social ‘impact’ from research, there is renewed emphasis on academic-activism as a means to realize social change. But what ‘counts’ as activism in these visions of academic-activist impact? Drawing on interviews with sex work scholars in the United Kingdom and Aotearoa New Zealand, we examine the borders – and the disruption of borders – between ‘traditional’ forms of activism and a wider array of more ‘minor’ practices frequently perceived as too ‘ordinary’ to claim that label. In doing this, we explore quiet, implicit and everyday forms of activism, arguing that activism is embodied, frequently undertaken by those who do not self-identify as activists, and sits ambivalently within broader institutional drives for research-based ‘impact’.

**Keywords**

sex work scholars, activism, minor theory, impact agenda, identity

**Corresponding author:**

Ian R Cook, Social Sciences, Northumbria University, Lipman Building, Sandyford Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE18ST, UK.

Email: [ian.cook@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:ian.cook@northumbria.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Researchers within and beyond the social sciences have long contended with the moral and ethical imperative to use their skills to foster social justice. Working from an awareness of the politics of knowledge production, researchers have sought ways to put their work ‘to work’, to help realize their own and their communities’ visions of positive social change. Precedents and touchstones for research-activism include Freirean articulations of transformative praxis (Freire, 1972), the ‘un-settling’ and decolonising activisms inherent in Indigenous and postcolonial scholarship (Smith, 1999), feminist theory connecting the personal to the political (Kitzinger, 1991) and critical race theory as a political and scholarly movement spotlighting and challenging associations between race, racism and power (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 1990; Williams, 1991; see also Crenshaw et al., 1995). Proposals for ‘making a sociology of social change and action’ were posed some time ago (Du Bois, 1997: 39). In Geography, too, there have been long running debates exploring how activism manifests in the working lives of academics, whether that be in highly visible and spectacular forms of protest, or through more quotidian ‘quiet’ acts or via engaging communities in research (e.g. Askins, 2009; Maxey, 1999; Taylor, 2014). In sexuality studies and closely related disciplines, attention to activism is growing. In the special issue of *Sexualities* celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, both Tiefer (2018) and Altman (2018) call for further engagement with activism within the journal’s pages. While the journal features compelling work on community activism (see, inter alia, Aroney, 2020; Middleweek, 2020; Ross and Sullivan, 2012), there are few articles exploring practices of activism and advocacy by academics in the context of their work and working lives.

Within and beyond sexuality studies, we need to know more about how academics are negotiating the growing institutional appetite for impact, alongside their own academic-activist activities. A central question is what ‘counts’ as activism in these visions and suggestions of more widespread academic-activism. Outside well-developed bodies of work on participatory scholarship-activism and action research (see, for example, Cammarota and Fine, 2008), there are few conversations exploring how researchers may be engaging in less overt forms of activism across the varied spaces of academic life, from publishing to teaching to community engagement. Preconceptions about what ‘real’ activism looks like – and who may legitimately claim to do activist work – may be holding broader, more inclusive theorisations and practices of academic-activism back (see Bobel, 2007). With the international rise of the ‘Impact Agenda’ – wherein academics are encouraged to demonstrate positive outcomes and influence progressive change across wider society (Smith et al., 2020) – the current moment demands greater reflection on the negotiations and licencing of academic-activism.

In this paper, we are interested in the borders – and the disruption of borders – between activism and academia, as well as the relationship between supposedly ‘traditional’ forms of activism and those practices that might be seen as being too ‘ordinary’ and not-quite ‘radical enough’ to be comfortably associated with the label activism. To explore these borders, we draw on and adapt Katz’s (1996) distinction between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ theory in the social sciences. We argue that minor academic-activism offers promise as

a conceptual manoeuvre or rubric that reveals and values those forms of academic-activism that are already disrupting the putative boundary.

To explore the liminal space of minor academic-activism, we examine the practices of sex work researchers from a range of disciplines. We draw on interviews conducted with 26 academics, from different academic disciplines, based in the United Kingdom (UK) or Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), who have engaged in research on sex work. We do so for two reasons. Firstly, the study of sex work is a field where strong – yet sometimes contentious (Holt, 2020) – connections between sex worker-activism, practitioner-activism and academic-activism exist, and where significant social stigma, professional stigma and stark ideological conflict brings otherwise generic challenges of academic-activism into sharper relief (Hammond and Kingston, 2014; Hanks, 2020). Second, we are motivated by the recent call by Connelly and Sanders (2020: 204) for a research agenda focused on ‘disrupting the boundaries that exist between academe and activism’ in the context of sex work research. Their account of sex work knowledge co-creation as a form of academic-activist praxis highlights opportunities for recognized and formalized types of ‘research impact’ within the contemporary university, but also points to challenges related to university brand management, restrictive funding arrangements and funder expectations, and the development of respectful and reciprocal, rather than extractive, relationships with non-academic research partners.

### *Minor academic-activism*

Thinking through ‘the minor’ – sometimes called a minoritarian view, a minor key or a minor register – has become a popular tactic in the social sciences. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of ‘minor literature’, Katz’s (1996) discussion of ‘minor theory’ is an important source of inspiration within social-scientific debates. Motivated by a concern with the marginal status of feminist theory in relation to hegemonic Marxist traditions, Katz (2017: 598) specifies:

To do minor theory is to make conscious use of displacement—of not being at home or of being between homes—so that new subjectivities, spatialities, and temporalities might be marked and produced in spaces of betweenness that reveal the limits of the major as it is transformed along with the minor.

Operating in relation to a dominant ‘major’, minor theory is not necessarily oppositional; rather, it is constituted by historical and geographic circumstances to be interstitial to major theory: ‘It is defined as minor in relation to a dominant major theory, but as the contexts change, so too can the designations of major and minor or the boundaries between them’ (Katz, 1996: 490). Theorising in a minor register, thus, involves thinking about hierarchies of (intellectual) value and visibility, consciously bringing into view that which falls under the shadow of dominant or major theory, and opening ‘many spaces of betweenness from which to imagine, act, and live things differently’ (Katz, 2017: 597).

What might it mean to bring this way of thinking to the context of academic-activism? Immediately, this requires a shared understanding of dominant (major) and interstitial

(minor) forms of activism within a given time and place. Most scholarly accounts of activism – including but not limited to academic-activism – seem to equate activism, at its broadest, with (a) individual or collective action that (b) seeks to bring about social or political change in relation to (c) a perceived injustice. Yet an expanding set of complementary conversations are signalling dissatisfaction with the perceived narrowing of what counts as legitimate activism in scholarly accounts. Much critique has been levelled at approaches that ‘champion and romanticise antagonistic, vocal and demonstrative forms of protest’ (Pottinger, 2017: 215), ‘in your face’ and ‘on the street’ activism (Bobel, 2007: 156), or ‘spectacular, vitalist, confidently knowing activisms’ (Horton and Krafl, 2009: 21). The crux of these critiques is similar: exclusionary preconceptions equating ‘real’ activism with the ‘omniscient, tireless and selfless individual’ (Bobel, 2007: 156). This arguably privileges an ableist, masculinist vision of activism which helps to marginalize and invisibilize a diverse array of activist work. Without explicitly aligning to the terminology of major/minor, these critiques work to articulate what happens in the margins of major activism, in the ‘many spaces of betweenness’ (Katz, 2017: 597) where minor activism resides.

A minor-activist register is evident in accounts that orbit around notions of quiet, gentle, implicit and everyday activism. Pottinger (2017: 217) refers to quiet activism as ‘a form of engagement that emphasizes embodied, practical, tactile and creative ways of acting, resisting, reworking and subverting’, which can be ‘identified as small, everyday, embodied acts, often of making or creating that can be either implicitly or explicitly political in nature’. Implicit activism is understood by Horton and Krafl (2009: 19) as ‘imperceptible mo(ve)ments of modestly political intent’. Gentle activism is related to ‘careful, consciously moderated modes of action [...] that are strategically non-oppositional’ (Cinnamon, 2020: 2). These accounts share much with a more voluminous literature on everyday life and everyday activisms (see, inter alia, Bobel, 2007; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Fish et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2017; Martin et al., 2007). Defined as ‘everyday actions by individuals that foster new social networks or power dynamics’ (Martin et al., 2007: 79), everyday activism is framed as a necessary but under-appreciated complement to practices of rupture and refusal typical of ‘iconic’ activism. The everyday quality of minor activisms, thus, means that such actions, and the subsequent knowledges produced by them, are very often part of the fabric and messiness of daily life (Katz, 2017).

Those engaged in academic-activism or scholar-activism are often grappling with the dominance of certain practices and the crowding out of others. Horton (2020: 1), for example, argues that ‘normative idealisations of “impact” within the contemporary academy can often lead us to value only those modes of social impact which are unabashedly substantial, muscular, large-scale, self-confident, and readily narratable as such’. Within many contemporary universities in Australia, NZ, UK, USA and elsewhere, recognition and reward are often granted to forms of non-academic impact that are at least one of two things. First, they are *institutionally favoured* through sectoral performance regimes (e.g. REF in the UK, ERA in Australia, PBRF in NZ), powerful discursive projects (e.g. the ‘Impact Agenda’) and intra-institutional incentives (e.g. promotion). Such practices tend to have a clear, causal, quantitatively evidenced ‘impact pathway’,

and often steer clear of socially and economically contentious topics. Indeed, being seen as an ‘activist’, with its connotations of radicalism and partiality to particular ‘sides’ of debate, can be detrimental in some academic-institutional contexts (McCowan, 2018; Rhodes et al., 2018; Slater, 2012). Second, forms of non-academic impact are *disciplinarily favoured* because of their alignment with dominant discipline-specific expectations of what constitutes ‘proper’ academic-activism. In this sense, major academic-activism in ‘critical’ (sub)disciplines has typically been staunch, oppositional and structurally oriented, sometimes linked to radical direct action and political organising which instigates and delivers significant and officially documented changes.

Minor academic-activism lies within the interstices of these institutionally and disciplinarily favoured forms of major academic-activism. Notably, minor academic-activism often remains elusive to institutional metrics typical of the formalised Impact Agenda, but also elusive to disciplinary plaudits in contexts that favour defiant and public radicalism. Examining ‘the minor’ therefore becomes a useful and inclusive conceptual manoeuvre when thinking about activism. It is particularly valuable when examining research done by sex work scholars, for whom it is often the case that aspects of their work are under-appreciated, under-valued and misrepresented by those inside and outside of the academy. It is an inclusive tactic that helps us to see what can be missed, dismissed or excluded by university audit culture, and recognises the potential of quiet activism in making a tangible difference, especially in policy and practice contexts.

With this in mind, the paper now turns to accounts of sex work scholars to understand how they engage in and negotiate minor academic-activism within the context of the contemporary university in the UK and NZ. Sex work scholars often conduct research and deliver teaching that has a focus on social justice, with research projects often having both a practical and theoretical application. To some extent, they already occupy the minor; as Katz (1996: 487) suggests, ‘[m]inor research strives to change theory and practice simultaneously’, as it is ‘relentlessly transformative and inextricably relational’ (Katz, 1996: 489). But what does this abstraction of ‘minor academic-activism’ look like on a personal level?

### *Researching the researchers*

This article draws on the varied experiences of a group of academics who have, in the broadest sense, researched sex work. Most have experiences of engaging sex workers directly in their research as participants and some have worked alongside sex workers to deliver research projects. By way of definition, sex work is ‘the exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation’ (Weitzer, 2010: 1).

Since the early 2000s, the academic literature exploring sex work has grown substantially. Its foci are incredibly varied, looking at issues including the labour of sex work and the lived experience of sex workers; diversity and intersectionality; technologies and online platforms; health and wellbeing; trafficking and migration; safety and violence; law, policing and regulation; clients and third parties; student sex work; and activism and rights (see, for example, the collections by Dewey et al., 2019; Sanders and Laing, 2018; Skilbrei and Spanger, 2018). The UK and NZ are central in the production of academic

work in this area. In both countries, sex work scholars – most of whom identify as women – are situated in a broad range of disciplines (e.g. sociology, criminology, law, human geography, public health, political science and international relations, anthropology, history, economics, psychology and social policy) with many positioning their research as interdisciplinary. Some sex work scholars focus all, or nearly all, of their research on sex work, while others see sex work as one of their multiple research interests.

Methodologically, this article draws on data collected within a wider research project that examines the role of ‘research impact’ within the lives of sex worker researchers. We completed semi-structured interviews with academics who have conducted research on sex work across a variety of disciplines. These interviews often returned to the issue of activism, more than we imagined they would at the start of the project, which as we state above was initially focused on research impact. In total, 26 participants were interviewed, including 19 based in the UK and seven based in NZ (the numbers mirroring, in a general way, the respective numbers of sex work researchers in both countries). It is essential that we keep the participants anonymous, and this necessity shapes how we now overview the project’s sampling strategy and the participants. In terms of sampling, we used a hybrid sampling strategy (purposive and convenience) whereby we sought to interview a variety of individuals from different backgrounds, some who we already knew personally, some who we did not. The participant group included academics of different genders and at different stages of their career, including PhD researchers. The participants have been anonymized in this article and we have ensured that no identifiable data is used in this article. While academic source material on sex work is cited in this article, this should not be read as an indication of who was interviewed. Conducted during 2018 and 2019, the interviews took place in person or via Skype or telephone. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo. We are indebted to the participants for their contributions to this project.

Our research focuses on two nations with very different sex work legislation. This, as we shall see, has implications for academic engagement in academic-activism. In 2003, NZ became the first nation to decriminalize sex work. As such, laws which criminalised sex workers and sex industries were repealed, and regulation is now performed through ‘standard commercial, criminal and administrative law’ (Armstrong, 2020: 2; see also Abel, 2014). The legal context is different in the UK. In England and Wales, the exchange of sex between consenting adults in a private place is legal but many activities surrounding the act itself are illegal. For example, it is an offence ‘for a person persistently to loiter or solicit in a street or public place for the purpose of prostitution’ (Release, 2017: 15). Other offences include controlling offences such as ‘keeping a brothel, causing or inciting prostitution for gain, controlling prostitution for gain’ (Release, 2017: 19). Scotland has a similar approach to England and Wales, but Northern Ireland differs as during the 2010s its Assembly emulated aspects of the ‘Swedish model’ by criminalising all instances of sex buying, while soliciting and loitering are not directly criminalized (McMenzie et al., 2019).

Despite the different legal contexts, most sex work scholars in NZ or the UK work from one of, or an amalgam of, three theoretical perspectives. The first being a liberal feminist perspective which views the sale of sex as a rational choice in the context of current

personal and structural constraints, and a form of flexible, potentially lucrative labour (Connelly et al., 2015). The second being a sex positive perspective, an approach which positions sexuality as ‘potentially positive’ which ‘celebrates sexual diversity, differing desires and relationship structures, and individual choices based on consent’ (Queen and Comella, 2008: 279). The third, meanwhile, is a rights-based perspective that recognizes the necessity of sex workers accessing human and labour rights and advocates for decriminalization, but it does so in the context of the sex industry itself being potentially problematic at both an individual and structural scale (Mac and Smith, 2018). Those working in and across these three perspectives usually argue that consenting adults who wish to sell or purchase sexual services should not be prevented by the state from doing so. As such, they reason that the state should take a harm reduction approach, focussing on creating the right conditions – legally, socially, economically, politically and environmentally – for people to sell sex. Many are, therefore, sympathetic to forms of decriminalization while some see value in tailored regulation of the sex industry.

Substantially fewer NZ or UK sex work scholars take up a radical feminist perspective. However, radical feminism underpins a substantial amount of research on violence against women (e.g. Dobash and Dobash, 1992; MacKay, 2015) as well as some sex work-related campaigning inside and outside the academy, particularly in Europe and North America. Radical feminists believe that prostitution should not be viewed as work – rejecting the term ‘sex work’ – instead they see it as a gendered form of violence and exploitation (Bindel, 2017; Raymond, 2013). The victims, for them, are not only ‘prostituted women’, to use Jeffreys’ (1997) terminology, but women everywhere. From this position, prostitution must be abolished and a central means of achieving this end is targeting those deemed to have choice and power: the clients and others they deem to be exploiters (e.g. those who manage parts of the sex industry). Thus, the radical feminist perspective shares little consensus with the three approaches outlined above, and it is fair to say that there is often considerable disagreement between the different perspectives. All of our participants – in their words when interviewed or in their published work – identify closely or at least partly with either the liberal, sex positive or rights-based approach or share some of the beliefs inherent to at least one of the approaches. We tried hard to include radical feminist academics within our sample; however, we were unable to interview anyone working from this perspective. As the influence of radical feminism within UK sex work policy, research and activism has been widely discussed (Carline and Scouler 2017; Ellison, 2017), the absence of radical feminists in our participant group is disappointing but it does open an avenue for future research.

### *‘Hand-in-hand’: surfacing minor activism in academic labour*

If we view activism through a minor lens, then the academics we interviewed performed a broad range of activisms. These included traditional, direct, oppositional and spectacular performances, alongside a multitude of quieter and quotidian acts, which were not always explicitly linked to traditionally conceived activism. Whether major or minor, the forms of activism interviewees engaged in took place in a range of settings – from work to home, online to offline, from the streets to workplaces and in voluntary organizations. The



considerable breadth of participants' activist work is evident in the passages below, where descriptions stretch from dominant framings of activism (street-based, involving protests and placards) to more oblique activities and settings (online, involving well-timed emails):

I did a huge amount of protests; I was always outside Parliament with a placard about something. I do think that activism is a key part of what I do, yeah [...] the activism part of engaging with people in the community is significant in my work (Participant 15)

I've engaged in a number of debates and consultations and evidence gathering events. [...] I've been doing quite a bit of policy advocacy work, not loads and loads [...] I presented research that I think would be quite useful. I've actually sent the email saying "here are the key findings from some research that I've done that might be of interest for your discussion or debate". [...] I would say that is more activist work (Participant 25)

Participants from NZ tended to focus their activism less on campaigning for wholesale changes to *domestic* sex work policy, unlike their UK counterparts. Furthermore, a higher percentage of participants from NZ than the UK had worked more directly with policymakers. This is perhaps unsurprising given that sex work scholars in NZ are broadly in favour of the system of decriminalization in place – a marked contrast to the dissatisfaction that most UK sex work scholars have with legislation across the UK.

Just as geography matters when it comes to activism, so too does the life-course (Maynard, 2017). Indeed, engagement in activism was viewed as something that fluctuated over the life-course: for some it was something that they did prior to being an academic, others mentioned how activism increased or 'decelerated' (Participant 22) once they arrived at a certain stage of their PhD, secured an academic job, had children, or had a change in caring responsibilities. For one scholar, activism went alongside their fieldwork, and was less compatible with the later stages of PhD study:

I have decelerated the activism a lot, just because for the sake of writing and just focusing on the PhD because [...] I need to focus on one thing at a time. But basically, I guess, during fieldwork I was kind of doing both (Participant 22)

Whether and how activism fitted into working life was also a clear feature of our conversations with sex work scholars. Some, such as Participant 25, engaged in activism outside traditional working hours: 'When I did outreach, I've been doing it on an evening; sometimes it would be Friday nights or Saturday nights or weekends'. For others, like Participant 22, it was more entwined with their day-to-day working duties: 'I never really thought of it as like, "okay, now I'm doing research and now I'm doing activism"; it [...] just always, yeah, went hand-in-hand'. Relatedly, some saw activism as something they did primarily in a professional capacity while others conducted it in a more personal capacity. This relationship between the personal and professional is reflected on by Participant 26:



I've also gone to lots of protests, marches, sex worker-lead activist events [...] But that is something I would see that I'm doing as [first name], not as Dr [surname]. But obviously, if it wasn't for Dr [surname], [first name] probably wouldn't be doing those things[.]

While research is a key arena in which sex work academics can lobby for social change, some interviewees framed teaching as an equally valuable avenue for social change and activism. The notion that teaching can be a form of consciousness-raising and transformative practice is well documented in the literature (Fox, 2012; Fahs, 2012; Rouhani, 2012; Stricker, 2020). That said, some interviewees saw the classroom as a place where they should withhold (to some extent) their activist and political views and identities when delivering lectures and seminars on the contentious politics of sex work; letting students draw conclusions from the evidence presented to them. Indeed, some talked of trying to 'maintain balance' (Participant 11) and a desire to 'be objective' (Participant 7). Relatedly, Participant 26 was confident that most students will draw from the evidence presented that decriminalization is 'the best option' without decriminalization and related perspectives being framing as 'the right way to look at this issue [and...] the only way'. These views resonate, to some degree, with the notion that activism is out of place in the classroom and more appropriately conducted elsewhere, as well as the concerns that 'political' pedagogy could be professionally risky (see, for instance, Collins, 2013). Others, however, saw the transformative potential of explicitly taking activism and a politicized identity into the classroom:

'I think teaching can be a form of activism, but I don't think it is in and of itself [...] But when your teaching is challenging the status quo—the racist, heteronormative, patriarchal status quo—then I think that can be transformative. And when you teach like that, I think there's a potential for it to enact social change, or to be activist' (Participant 1)

This approach reflects discourses of critical pedagogy, which according to Rouhani (2012) positions the classroom as a 'socially transformative space' (1727) and education as 'a political act that can empower all agents involved, encourage social activism, challenge social problems and repressive ideologies' (1726; see also Freire, 1972). Thus, the classroom was, for some interviewees, an arena for activism, a place to enact or encourage social change.

Outside of teaching and research, the interviewees discussed responding to policy and practice consultations, delivering workshops and training, volunteering for third sector organizations, and doing other types of 'behind-the-scenes' work. Participant 22 spent a lot of time 'translating things, helping [...] with funding applications' while Participant 11 engaged in 'running workshops and events and training sessions, and attending training sessions'. Participants also discussed how they would raise awareness of the experiences of sex workers and call for policy change through other means, such as social media, engaging with journalists and print media, taking part in public debate, and by speaking or writing in publicly accessible and freely available formats. These types of 'minor' activism were often performed in private, indoors, often at home, at different times of the day and week. They did not always fit neatly under the banner of workloaded

academic duties and would probably not ‘count’ under restrictive impact metrics. Hence, these important ‘minor’ acts exist in a space of ‘betweenness’, and the production of knowledge associated with said acts is ‘embodied, situated and messy’; it is ‘non-linear’ and ‘alter[s] the terrain of theory and practice’ (Katz, 1996: 498).

### *‘I can get quite activist’: claiming minor-activist identities*

While it was clear that sex work scholars undertook a wide range of activist activities in their personal and professional lives, relatively few claimed an activist identity with ease. Participant 17, for example, was unusual in self-identifying ‘first as an activist and then second as an academic’. Others were considerably less sure they fitted – or ‘lived up to’ – activist labels and hesitated to use the terms ‘activist’ and ‘activism’ to describe their identities and practices. Participant 2, for instance, said that these words were ‘more political than I am’. Participant 8 reasoned they were not an activist because they ‘shy away from quite public confrontation’ and Participant 1 explained that they ‘don’t feel worthy of that term, really’.

Yet if we follow Bobel (2007), it is possible to argue that one can perform activism without identifying as an activist. Bobel argues that the label ‘activist’ is problematic due to its association with an unattainable ‘perfect standard’ reflecting ‘unrealistic, even romantic, notions of the omniscient, tireless and selfless individual’ (Bobel, 2007: 156). In other words, the highly circumscribed understanding of what ‘being an activist’ means left the academics we interviewed with very little room to claim their minor-activist activities as ‘real’ activism. This lack of space appeared to create a level of difficulty for participants in identifying as activists, despite their activist activities. This discomfort with, or personal distancing from, the activist identity is reflected in our conversation with Participant 8, who remarked: ‘I don’t think I’ve earned the right to say I’m an activist’.

Some interviewees resolved this tension by asserting in-between identities (also reflecting that the ‘minor’ can be embodied): ‘Can I say sort of neo-activist? Half activist?’ (Participant 11); ‘a real-world participatory academic’ (Participant 23); ‘I’m definitely an ally’ (Participant 6); ‘I’m a quiet activist’ (Participant 2). These examples of participants creatively reworking the activist identity – in ways that distance themselves from traditional, loud and full activism – further highlight the exclusionary standards surrounding the term (Bobel, 2007). Even so, many of these and others still engaged in major and minor acts that sought to contribute towards social justice goals, whether through the nominal academic duties of teaching, research and administration or through other means. This chimes with Connelly and Sanders’ (2020: 207) assessment:

While there are strong theoretical traditions within sex work studies, much of the scholarship is applied in nature—that is to say, it aims to improve the lived realities of sex workers. In this regard, many sex work scholars use their work to either implicitly contribute to, or explicitly lobby for, social change.

Indeed, sex work scholars in the UK and NZ have undertaken vital ‘minor’ resistance work, helping sex working communities directly and indirectly. Although such acts may

be quiet and every day, performed by those who may not self-identify as activists, they are often purposeful, practical and tangible forms of minor activism. They frequently fall outside of normative understandings of teaching, research and administration duties and are performed in spaces of betweenness; ‘inseparable from – if not completely absorbed in – the mess of everyday life’ (Katz, 2017: 598).

### *Activism, impact and sex work scholars*

In this section, we consider the institutional context of major and minor activism by sex work scholars. It concentrates on the wider Impact Agenda that scholars in the UK and NZ – as well as other parts of the world – are increasingly encouraged to align with and are measured against. Indeed, in the interviews conducted, discussions about activism were often intertwined with discussions about the Impact Agenda, a sector-wide project (sometimes formal, other times more diffuse and informal) that ‘requires academics to address not only the intrinsic value of their research in advancing knowledge – its academic merit – but also the value their research has to society – its *broader impacts*’ (Holbrook, 2017: 2, emphasis as original). There is increasing institutional pressure to redesign and repackage research as being impactful, as being – or being *seen to be* – a catalyst for some sort of positive social change.

In NZ, the Impact Agenda is best thought of as a lower-case ‘impact agenda’, insofar as there are diverse and not strongly formalized signals that are attempting to encourage researchers to pay greater attention to non-academic impacts of their research. These signals span the national research assessment mechanism – the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) – as well as assessment criteria for a range of ‘mission-led’ sources of funding, and institution-specific research support teams that assist researchers to plan and evidence ‘for impact’. In the UK, the upper-case Impact Agenda is firmly situated within the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a system for assessing research quality in higher education institutions, the outcomes of which are used for benchmarking processes and the allocation of research funding. Many academics, however, have been critical of the Impact Agenda, arguing among other things that social change cannot be adequately captured by audit frameworks (e.g. Connolly and Sanders, 2020; McCowan, 2018; Rhodes et al., 2018; Slater, 2012). Others, such as Pain et al. (2011: 185), have cited the possibilities of mobilising the impact agenda to make long-devalued forms of scholarly engagement valuable, and to ‘push for a model of academic accountability’.

What, then, is the relationship between the Impact Agenda and minor activism? To begin answering this, it is worth reflecting on the contention of Rhodes et al. (2018) that, despite the notion that activism and impact can ‘justify academic work on the basis of [their] ability to change the world’ (140), they are very different. Drawing on Rancière (1998), Rhodes and colleagues see the Impact Agenda as a conservative, depoliticized form of policing, legitimizing the ‘prevailing distribution of power’ (140) and maintaining a ‘neoliberal status quo’ (139). This idea echoes criticisms elsewhere that the Impact Agenda feeds into the wider neoliberal drive to measure, compare and compete within the academy, further cementing what Beer (2016) terms ‘metric power’ (see

Feldman and Sandoval, 2018 for a discussion of metric power in the neoliberal university). Yet, academic-activism diverts from this – in fact, it challenges such measures and systems. Academic-activism, according to Rhodes et al. (2018: 139) ‘serves to politicize scholarly work by democratically disrupting political consensus in the name of equality’, targeting injustices within and beyond the academy.

The criticism of impact by Rhodes et al. (2018) echoes the concerns of the UK-based sex work scholars Connelly and Sanders (2020) that ‘the current system of Higher Education ultimately stymies “academic-activist” approaches to research’ (203) whereby the ‘REF may foster a kind of “impact” that does not seriously challenge the status quo’ (213). Indeed, many of those interviewed were critical of a neoliberal, institutionally prescribed ‘Impact Agenda’ where impact must be evidenced and presented in very particular and restrictive ways. Some, such as Participant 5, argued that the definition of evidence under REF ‘isn’t very clear’ while others argued that the imperatives to measure-your-own-impact are difficult at best, impossible at worst:

[E]verything has to be accounted for and it almost becomes this sort of tick box exercise, doesn’t it? [...] I think that’s very difficult because any kind of movement is the work of so many people. To try and quantify your individual impact of that is a bit nuts. (Participant 26)

Participant 19, meanwhile, questioned the Impact Agenda’s insistence on demonstrating change:

I have this debate quite often with people, about particularly the REF impact agenda and how difficult it is to build an Impact case study around non-events. [G]enerally although you might present research and articulate progressive change to policy agendas, those things [policy changes based on academic evidence] don’t happen. So, the best we can probably claim is that the research that we have done, or I have done, has contributed to a general discussion about sex work that has prevented worse policy things happening.

These comments pose questions about minor activism ‘performed at low volumes’ (Pottinger, 2017: 216). The Impact Agenda, suffice to say, does not want academics to be quiet or, as Saville (2020) suggests, humble; instead, academics are implored to be loud (within certain parameters), to promote their research within and beyond the academy, to publicly detail their individual role and the contribution of their research in affecting social change. In essence, to identify themselves as impactful. It is questionable, therefore, whether the Impact Agenda is a conducive institutional environment for quiet minor activism thrive in. This brings us on to Participant 1 who questioned the applicability of Impact Agenda for smaller scale projects, wondering ‘if it’s opened up or closed down opportunities for the kind of “small I” impact that people do’. This was a quandary raised by many interviewees. Indeed, some suggested that the Impact Agenda has given them time to engage in activities that we can classify as minor activism. Others, however, were concerned that the Impact Agenda draws their activism away from those projects which are not easily translatable in the context of metrics; or that it is yet another institutional pressure that ironically provides them with little or no time to engage in activism.

Suffice to say, the Impact Agenda does not, in and of itself, seem to have motivated sex work scholars in the UK or NZ to engage in forms of minor activism. During the interviews, many talked about being driven instead by a personal or political passion and determination to, as [Connolly and Sanders \(2020: 207\)](#) state, ‘improve the lived realities of sex workers’. Participant 10 clarified this: ‘That’s actually part of what doing good feminist reflexive sex work research is: to reach out beyond the academy’.

Notably, sex work academics sought out the quiet minor in their desired impact. Rather than attempting ‘big bang’, self-congratulatory type Impact associated with institutional audit regimes, like the REF, many interviewees aimed for ‘small changes, incremental changes in a community’s sense of confidence, voice; small changes in practice’ (Participant 14). A desire to help change practice – particularly of those institutions that regularly engage with sex workers or affect the lives of sex workers – was a common motivation stated:

I started my research from that perspective: thinking about what more should be done in a very practical way to support policing, to deliver services and respond to sex work in a better way. I think I’ve always had that, rather than that ivory tower academic approach to my research. (Participant 23)

For some participants, their activism was not about being a critical voice staunchly sat on the outside; it was more about influencing policy and practice from the inside. In other words, using the privilege of access their status is sometimes given for the benefit of sex workers; although, as [Connolly and Sanders \(2020\)](#) state, sometimes this access is granted at the expense of access given to sex workers. In contrast, some scholars preferred instead activism that engaged primarily with activist groups addressing broader structural inequalities and injustices:

I think some of my activism outside of the academy is not always focused on sex work because I think it needs to be anti-racist, and it needs to be feminist more broadly. Because I think those social structures affect everyone including sex workers, to greater or lesser extents. (Participant 1)

A key motivation for sex worker scholar-activism was the desire to challenge and change the narratives, stigmas and stereotypes that the public, policymakers and (sometimes) practitioners hold about sex workers:

I think because sex workers are so misrepresented in policy generally that I kind of feel that I owe it to my participants to present their perspective [...] It does make me quite angry when [policy reports] come out that’s not based on evidence at all and here am I collecting lots of evidence and it’s not being listened [to]. I feel it’s the responsibility of academics to promote their research. I mean, it’s not always that easy but if there are findings that are policy-relevant, which often they are in sex work research, I think it is something we need to do. (Participant 7)

The Impact Agenda, in short, has not been galvanizing scholars into engaging in different forms of activism related to sex work. There are other personal, political and ethical motivations behind such activities.

## Conclusion

This paper has reflected the practice of academic-activism through the accounts of sex work scholars. Some of the practices of our interview participants align with the variously confrontational, oppositional, public, visible, loud and spectacular activities that so often are associated with the identity of the activist. But more often, we heard them talk about a set of activities – advice, organising, testimony and collaboration, among others – that our participants thought were too ordinary and not-quite radical enough to comfortably associate them or themselves with the labels ‘activist’ or ‘activism’. As one interviewee reluctantly put it, coming around to the label: ‘maybe I’m a quiet activist’. Yet, our interviewees lead us to think that the boundaries between academe and activism are already quite porous in the field of sex work studies. In conceptual terms, our paper has attempted to understand these disrupted boundaries and the inbetweenness by bringing theories of the ‘minor’ into the realm of academic-activism. Our initial foray has drawn connections between accounts of ‘quiet’, ‘everyday’ and ‘implicit’ activism (sometimes academic-activism, but more often focused on activism in general) through the notion of the ‘minor’: that which happens in the margins of major activism. We argue that recognising the minor in the context of academic-activism is a valuable conceptual manoeuvre, to make visible the varied actions undertaken by sex work scholars in the context of their research in the name of social change. This recognition of what could be considered more quotidian forms of activism is a direct challenge to what is positioned as valid or valuable ‘Impact’ as defined by institutional audit culture. Such definitions of ‘Impact’ are often limiting, not only in the context of academic research – dictating how researchers should collect data in order to generate measurable outcomes – but most importantly, they are limiting to the communities who we as academics serve, who should independently or alongside academics be setting the research agenda, which ultimately focuses on their lived experiences (see [Holt, 2020](#)). Hence, focussing on the minor is an inclusive tactic, encompassing that which could be missed and recognising its value in the context of social change.

In empirical terms, we arrived at two overarching insights through the accounts of sex work scholars. The first is the mixed reception and recognition that those who engage with minor activism receive. In the case of sex work scholars, sometimes their efforts are welcomed by academic institutions, the public, the media and sex working communities and at other times they are less welcomed. Likewise, their work is not always recognised as activism, either by themselves or by others. Yet, much of this work should be acknowledged and celebrated as actions that challenge injustice and seek social change, irrespective of whether we can measure their impact or not. The second insight is that the institutionalization of the Impact Agenda is perceived ambivalently by those engaging in forms of minor academic-activism. On the one hand, our participants were drawn to minor activism because they felt they could ‘make a difference’, mobilising their expert

authority to communicate with decision-makers and the public, and leveraging the time and financial resources afforded by academic employment to build capacity within campaigns and organisations outside academia. On the other, participants identified tensions between institutionally rewarded ‘impact’ (i.e. oftentimes large-scale, clearly measurable and individually attributable changes), the needs of their non-academic communities and the low appetite for transformation in hostile or inertia-laden socio-political contexts. As academic practice moves in the likely direction of more deliberate application to the issues confronting various non-academic communities, our discussion has highlighted the importance of varied and already-existing forms of academic-activism that deserve to be seen and valued. If the mission is to ‘disrupt’ these boundaries (Connelly and Sanders 2020) – or disrupt them more thoroughly – one approach is to recognize, amplify and reward that which lies latent: forms of academic-activism that appear to be under-noticed and under-valued amid more institutionally rewarded forms of ‘Impact’ and more disciplinarily legible forms of radical activism and formal policy influence.

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### ORCID iDs

Mary Laing  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2745-2632>

Ian R Cook  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4674-9354>

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