

**Studying the “Right” Can Feel Wrong:  
Reflections on Researching Anti-LGBT Movements**

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*To conservative Christians, homosexuality was sinful, unnatural, against God and family.*

*To the vast majority, who believed that religion—and sex—should be kept private, these words sounded intolerant, overly zealous, even hateful.*

(Stein 2001, 110)

Scholars have studied how conservative Christians who believe homosexuality to be a sin can be fundamentally intolerant and narrow-minded, willing to articulate the worst elements of homophobic society. Over the last 40 years, leaders such as Jerry Falwell have disseminated hateful language about the “gay agenda” and God’s judgment on a society that tolerates homosexuals. They have mobilized tremendous resources and organized a massive social movement in opposition to lesbian and gay rights and in support of the social exclusion of trans people. How does one, as a queer or queer-supportive scholar, go about studying issues of sexuality among conservative Christians and other anti-LGBT activists? Arlene Stein, quoted above, grappled with this issue in her research on how a small Oregon community dealt with an early 1990s political referendum to prohibit “special rights” for homosexuals. Her book, *The Stranger Next Door* (Stein 2001), offers a balanced and sympathetic view on the logic of the conservative Christian perspective, demonstrating the source of the panic about homosexuality as

rooted in a weakening economy caused by a slump in the timber industry. Her analysis gives a broader understanding to counter the simplistic impulse to name all conservative Christians as intolerant. She helps us to understand the structural conditions that can motivate anti-LGBT politics. At the same time, her research highlights the ways that studying conservative Christian perspectives takes an intellectual and emotional toll on researchers who might feel themselves implicated in the politics of hate that can spew from the religious right.

As researchers who have studied anti-LGBT movements among conservative Christians in the United States, we have firsthand knowledge of the opportunities and challenges of studying right-wing politics. For Melanie's dissertation research, she left her progressive enclave in California to conduct an in-depth ethnography of the politics of marriage in Oklahoma, one of the first states to use welfare funds to support a statewide marriage initiative. The goal of the initiative was to solve the problem of poverty and the economic hardships the state faced by promoting and strengthening heterosexual marriage, seeking to reduce state expenditures due to divorce and single motherhood. During this time, activism was high in Oklahoma to ensure that lesbians and gay men could not legally marry, and Melanie sought to understand the tensions and contradictions in efforts to promote marriage for some and ban it for others. As a graduate student, Tina began researching the anti-LGBT activism of the religious right in the United States. She dug into the historic records of anti-LGBT movement groups, collecting their press releases and organizational data, listening to their broadcasts, and conducting interviews with people in key positions in religious-right organizations. She became an expert on how the religious right movement formed, solidified its ties with the Republican Party, and shaped public policy. She has also studied groups who conduct "ex-gay" reparative therapy, interviewed founders of Tea Party organizations, and researched the religious right in Canada.

In studying the institutional forces of right-wing politics, each of us drew on elements of a “queer methodology” to shine light on the specific power structures that animate anti-LGBT movements. Our empirical and historical methods offered insight into the ways that LGBT identities are constructed as deviant others, and how conservative religious forces build their power based on the principle that heterosexuality is completely natural and unquestionable. Anti-LGBT activists struggle with the contradiction that their own activism demonstrates the instability of hegemonic ideas about heterosexuality. Studying groups that embrace a politics of disgust against people and practices that anti-LGBT activists view as deviant and sinful presents specific challenges to queer and queer-supportive scholars.

In this chapter, we share insights from our experiences studying anti-LGBT movements among conservative Christians and the religious right. We have organized the chapter to follow particular concerns we faced during the important steps of entering the field, collecting data, and analyzing findings. First, we consider the complexities of managing one’s identity in a research environment where participants’ views radically diverged from our own. Second, we offer insights about difficult interactions in the field. Finally, we discuss the bleakness of spending extended periods of time analyzing and writing about data that are adverse to our core values. We reflect on the value of studying right-wing activism and offer some thoughts on managing these research projects.

### **Managing Identity in Conservative Spaces**

*As a graduate student at New York University, I took numerous steps to adjust my appearance to become presentable to the religious-right activists that I had arranged to interview face-to-face. I tried to look less feminist, less urban, and*

*less mistakable-for-lesbian. I aspired to mainstream beauty standards for young women. I spent months growing out my hair, I picked out a professional-but-feminine outfit, and I put on makeup. Arriving at the offices of a major religious-right organization where I had an interview appointment, the first question that greeted me was, "So, you are from New York City?" The suspicion was thick in the room; it was clear that I had no chance of fitting in here, despite all my hard work to look "normal." -Tina*

Looking back on my extensive-yet-feeble attempts to manage my appearance as I entered the field of anti-LGBT activists, I have to laugh at my naiveté. *I spent all that time growing out my hair for nothing?* It was clear to these activists that a graduate student from New York doing research on their group was not a friend of theirs no matter what I looked like, and they were right. I am a queer-supportive, straight-identified sociologist who is concerned about the harm done by this major religious right organization. However, in person, in the field, I had hoped to package and suppress my concerns, my judgments, so that I could conduct a successful interview. I tried to demonstrate my goodwill and my openness to a connection with the person who agreed to be interviewed by presenting myself as traditionally feminine, but she saw right through me. And I learned that it is okay to conduct qualitative research in the field even though I didn't fit in. She completed the interview and answered my questions even though she didn't trust me, even though we never did connect.

Qualitative researchers generally recognize the importance of appearance as a methodological tool. By fitting in the investigator becomes less strange in the eyes of those she studies. The challenges to fitting in, however, are multiplied in anti-LGBT settings like the ones I studied, and sometimes efforts to fit in fail. Despite this, data collection strategies can succeed.

Arlene Stein (2001) found in her study of conservative Christians in Oregon that being a stranger had its advantages. People were willing to share with her the issues dearest to their hearts exactly because she was an outsider, and more astonishingly because she was viewed as an exotic outsider—her Jewishness ultimately facilitated trust. Simultaneously, she recognized the importance of managing which identities she presented in the field. When people asked her about her personal life, she answered in ways that drew on their heteronormative assumptions about family life. Yes, she was married and had a son who was nine-months old (there was no need to explain that she was married to a woman). She believed that introducing more than one type of otherness—in this case her sexuality—might pose too much of a threat.

In my case, I was not only an exotic other like Stein, but my participants met me with an active distrust—one I deserved, from their perspective. Rather than make a connection with my participants, then, I had to find another reason for my participants to share their thoughts and interpretations with me. I soon learned how to channel an active and open curiosity. That is, instead of building rapport based on common ground with my participants, I encouraged my participants to explain everything to me precisely because I was not aware of where they were coming from. I cultivated a presentation of self that communicated a curiosity that was based on my strangeness, my ignorance of participants' everyday lives. While this didn't build the sort of rapport that qualitative texts recommend, it did give my participants an excellent incentive to share their perspectives with me. They sought to fill me in, to let me know what the world looked like from their side, to correct my ignorance of their motivations to make a living promoting what they would call traditional values. For my part, I was very careful not to express or even hint at any judgments or disdain—whether in my questions, my body language or my tone of

voice. Rather, I presented myself as inquisitive, perhaps at times puzzled about one detail or another that I might follow up on, but always willing to hear whatever my participants had to say.

It is difficult to anticipate how, and even whether, a researcher may be received in the field. Ultimately, fitting in does not have to be the goal. Our experiences, along with those of Stein, highlight the importance of approaching the field with thoughtfulness and a desire to connect with participants. No matter the beliefs or opinions a person carries, she or he wants to be heard and understood. There are many ways to find common ground and manage the messiness of conducting fieldwork with groups who may be hostile to a researcher's political perspective. Stein calls this “critical empathy,” or the ability to understand the relationship between personal biography and social context that informs worldviews (2001, 230). Entering the field and managing one’s identity means risking failures and finding solutions. At times, researchers may have to revise their research design when a plan to interview particular people meets with closed doors. Such obstacles may occur more often when studying conservative groups like anti-LGBT organizations. At the same time, entering the field with a genuine desire to learn about other people’s perspectives in a non-judgmental fashion can aid in securing institutional support, finding a key informant, or recruiting interview participants.

## **Difficult Interactions**

### *Reflexivity*

*Interviewing conservative Christians often involved explicit anti-gay language that left little doubt about intentions. I remember a specific interview with a participant who had attended a marriage workshop that included a lesbian couple. Towards the*

*end of the interview, I asked him how he felt about this couple's attendance. He responded that he hadn't even thought about it. This surprised me, as their presence had seemed to create tensions concerning how to talk about sex and the assumption that sex is always heterosexual. Then seemingly out of context, the participant told the following story that left me speechless:*

*I had a homosexual in the eleventh grade. If you think back to that time, if you ever went outside and played sports, you get a lot of butt patting—good shot! [He demonstrates.] I made a move in basketball in the gym, and the guy was known to be gay. ... I made a good move, and he goes good job [He demonstrates the guy patting him on the butt]. And, all I remember was turning around, right crossing him, watching him hit the ground, and he was unconscious. And I could care less. You violated my privacy, homeboy, because I didn't touch you.*

*After this confession, I nodded my head and mumbled "ah-huh," trying to cover the intense internal conflict I was experiencing on how to respond. I smiled and moved to the next question. -Melanie*

I responded to this confession as if this man had actually struck me; I had difficulty regaining my composure after hearing these words that, as a queer scholar, left me feeling vulnerable. Yet, this visceral response surprised me. When I entered the field, I was prepared to conduct interviews with people whose beliefs and opinions differed fundamentally from my own. A few years earlier, I had conducted interviews with Promise Keepers, a Christian organization that encourages men to be leaders in their families and society (Heath 2003). My own background, having been raised in a conservative Baptist church, aided me in establishing rapport with

conservative Christian men to learn about how they negotiated masculinity to produce a “soft-boiled” form that allowed them to reinstate their positions of authority in the family and society. Similar to my former research, I entered the field for this new project with an open mind and a curiosity to understand the belief systems of actors who embraced heterosexual marriage as the bedrock of society. At the time of this interview, I had already conducted many other interviews with actors who used homophobic language, and I had responded by trying to understand their perspective. In this case, the complete incongruence and violence recounted in the story caught me off-guard, and I quickly changed the subject to hide the feelings of fear and disgust I did not want to show.

Feminist and sexuality scholars have recognized the importance of reflexivity for identifying one’s own privilege or social location in respect to the people one is studying. Being reflexive is also important to challenging one’s own stereotypes and prejudices and understanding the power a researcher has over her participants. But how does this concept apply in cases of conservative movements, particularly when the individual being interviewed may have more institutional power? After all, we were in a workshop backed by the U.S. federal government, the State of Oklahoma, and the local church. His homophobic response was affirmed by hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. How can we think about our roles as ethnographers at those moments when our impulse is to speak truth to power? Avishai, Gerber, and Randles (2013) propose the idea of a “feminist ethnographer’s dilemma” to point to the ways that a commitment to feminist politics can be detrimental to identifying empirical realities that do not conform with feminist expectations. In the case of beliefs that motivate anti-LGBT movements, the goal of attending to this kind of dilemma can be helpful in situations where you are caught off guard. Perhaps my reaction would have been less violent if I *had* been able at this



moment to set aside my own personal beliefs that led me to instinctively judge this man's story as homophobic. It was not my job during the interview to defend the rights of the gay boy who was left unconscious on the floor, a feeling that arose instinctively. This kind of reflexivity needs to guide every stage of the research, not just the moments outside the field when theorizing, designing or analyzing data. The value of this kind of reflexivity can help to guide a moment of silence, to give time to recover.

Interviews with and observations of anti-LGBT and other right-wing activists necessarily involve difficult interactions. People with strong anti-LGBT views often support policies that harm LGBT individuals and families. They hold values that can be understood to be exclusive and judgmental. Spending time in the field listening to hateful or insensitive remarks that get to the heart of things that you care about can be challenging. It is difficult interactively—how do you respond to these statements? It can also be difficult emotionally—perhaps you feel complicit in an anti-LGBT agenda. We have learned in conducting research on anti-LGBT groups that researchers collecting data from individuals with anti-gay views must expect these sorts of uncomfortable interactions. They cannot be sidestepped by not asking about them directly. Instead, researchers should prepare for them by practicing these kinds of interactions in a supportive space with a friend or colleague who is willing to role play.

### *Beliefs vs. Values*

*I was interviewing the Communications Director of one of the foremost social movement organizations of the religious right. I was frustrated that the woman who had agreed to be interviewed would not answer my questions about how their organization selects the wording of their advertisements—this was specifically her*

*job, and it should have been a fairly straightforward set of questions to answer.*

*Marked as an outsider who needed to be convinced of the merits of their anti-LGBT activism, the interviewee kept telling me what she considered to be facts about gay men:*

*You know, homosexual couples have way more domestic violence, but the news doesn't report it...They get into the schools – that's what they are trying to do with those rights laws; they want to be teachers! They want to recruit the young boys. They can't have their own [kids], so they have to recruit...[Pulling a clipping from a file] Here is a news story about one who stabbed his boyfriend...*

*This seemed to go on for so long. I wanted to leave so badly; I couldn't take listening to this. Plus, I had made a long trip to collect this and a few other interviews, and I was not getting the data I needed for my research. Why wouldn't she just answer my questions? - Tina*

In my Introduction to Sociology class, I talk about the difference between beliefs and values. Beliefs, I say, are people's understanding of "what is," while values are what they think "ought to be." As I prepared to conduct these interviews, I had steadied myself for interacting with people whose values were different from mine. I had practiced my interview technique with colleagues who role-played as conservative activists, and I tried to present myself in a neutral, open way during interviews. What I had not prepared for, however, was a difference of beliefs that manifested as a barrage of "facts" that were as dangerous as they were demonstrably false. As I listened to statements about gay men having mental illness, engaging in deviant sexual practices with minors, being prone to domestic violence, I felt infuriated. I wanted so badly to

correct the record, to set my interviewee straight. I was ready for a disagreement about what ought to be, but our disagreement about what is frustrated me greatly.

I realized later that this was also something I should have prepared for as I entered the field. Indeed, to do in-person interviews with anyone, we try to bracket off our understandings of what is so that we may make the space to listen and learn about what our participants' understandings and beliefs are. My purpose in the field was to collect data through observations and interactions, and my impulse to correct my interviewees ran counter to this research objective. It is vital to enter the field with an open mind that is ready to take in the beliefs and opinions of participants. This is especially important for research on anti-LGBT groups and other sites where a common knowledge cannot be assumed. I recommend using the same active listening techniques that work well for qualitative research generally—nodding, making eye contact, and leaving long pauses in the conversation for your research subject to fill.

As social norms about sexuality change, it is not always easy to collect explicit claims that condemn LGBT rights or disparage LGBT people. Most people keep these opinions to themselves. However, like all activists, conservative Christians in the religious right must generate discourse. They are among the few who make explicit, anti-LGBT claims that we as researchers can record, collect and analyze in our research. These uncomfortable interactions in the field are also uniquely rich research opportunities. Only when the talk of right-wing activists is explicit can we accurately capture their discursive strategies, their beliefs, their understanding of the "facts."

That does not mean it is easy. The emotional toll of having repeated interactions with people who express anti-LGBT beliefs is something to take seriously as a researcher. This is compounded for those researchers, like Melanie, who pack up their belongings and travel to a

conservative setting to live for long stretches of time. It takes a particular kind of openness to take in these data, to silence the voice that wants to speak back to the research subject, and to encourage research participants to elaborate, give more details, and dwell on uncomfortable topics. This openness is also vulnerability, and the hurtful words we hear may cause discomfort or even pain. Self-care should be a part of the researcher's data collection plan—time to retreat, to express frustrations to supportive friends or colleagues, and to rest between interactions.

We also think it is okay to take steps that set reasonable limits on our exposure to anti-LGBT interactions. Perhaps some data can be collected through a document search rather than interviews, or perhaps collecting data from some movement groups rather than others will provide data without exacting too high a toll. For example, Tina collected data from large, professional organizations in the religious right, but chose not to include activists from a local church in which pastors ritually exorcised the demons out of lesbian and gay people. While this may have been a missed opportunity, the latter felt unsafe in a way that the former did not. Perhaps another researcher will be better positioned to take on that subject one day.

### **Sitting with Anti-LGBT Data: Analysis and Writing**

*I was able to conduct in-depth interviews with individuals at the top of the organizational hierarchy of the marriage initiative in Oklahoma, and one of the final interviews was with Mary Myrick, President of the public relations/affairs firm that managed the initiative. In the 2004 election, a constitutional amendment that defined marriage as a union between one man and one woman had just passed in Oklahoma, with 76 percent of voters in favor. I asked Mary Myrick about whether the marriage initiative took a stand on the constitutional ban. Her answer was simple: “We*

*actually don't deal with it much. We are very clear about our mission. ...Our position is that we're a marriage initiative designed to encourage activities that lead to marriage, and our state has defined marriage as an act between a man and a woman, and until the state defines it differently, we . . . it's really all defined for us. We don't get into the debate about it." - Melanie*

There were times when my emotional response to data like this got in the way of my analysis. How could Mary Myrick dismiss the issue of same-sex marriage so briskly? Her response initially infuriated me, but sitting with my data allowed me to see that her words made perfect sense within her worldview. Since the marriage initiative's goal is strengthening marriage in society, involvement with the same-sex marriage debate could muddy the waters. Her words point to the logic that perpetuates heterosexuality's institutionalization in society. Same-sex relationships are marked as other, to be dealt with separately from what she saw as the more important issue of creating stronger marriages that the state defined as heterosexual. This example accentuates the particular stakes of studying conservative, anti-gay movements and organizations that openly embrace the "institutional embeddedness of normative heterosexuality" (Seidman 2009:25). While infuriating, it was no surprise that it was so easy for conservative actors to dismiss the marital politics that facilitated an easy victory of a state constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage. Over and over in my interviews, participants would give this kind of politically savvy response to evade the appearance of homophobia—referencing the state as the decisive actor provided an easy out. The directness of their responses shone a light on ways that heterosexuality is institutionalized to provide cover for those in high-status positions to avoid addressing discrimination and oppression against lesbians and gay men.

Analyzing and writing about these kinds of anti-LGBT actors and spaces was both inspiring and demoralizing. For months, I had coded passages from my interviews and field notes that documented how a systematic culture of heteronormativity was reinforced through the marriage initiative in Oklahoma, from state actors who organized free workshops that taught about communication and the importance of marriage, to individuals who participated in them. On the one hand, I was inspired by the opportunity to provide a sociological lens on these processes that support heteronormative social structures. On the other hand, I felt discouraged when immersed in data that uncovered the strength of these movements, state bureaucracies, and social processes that are organized to marginalize queer people and to deny LGBT rights. It is a dark place to occupy on a daily basis.

To deal with the possible pessimism that can arise from studying and writing about movements that have challenged our deepest beliefs, we point to the thoughtfulness of other scholars who have conducted research on painful topics. Gloria Anzaldúa offers insight into conceptualizing these dark spaces as “nepantla,” an “unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space” that can produce “an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling” (2002, 1). In her research on incest in Mexican society, Gloria Gonzales-Lopez (2010) builds on Anzaldúa’s concept to theorize the “epistemologies of the wound,” or the places that enabled her to build knowledge about the sexualized wounds recounted by her participants. Researchers must make an epistemological commitment to deal with the intense emotions that can arise in studying topics that can be painful. It is this kind of openness and depth that produces meaningful analyses by taking seriously perspectives that may seem intolerant and hateful (O’Brien 2009). Studying anti-LGBT movements means facing the contradictions between our own standpoints and those whom we study.

What steps can we take to help us deeply engage with data that represents hateful perspectives? We recommend writing memos at all stages of the research process that can serve as reminders of the humanity of individuals who hold beliefs antithetical to queer and queer-supportive scholars and that can help to shine light on possibilities for social change. While the study of anti-LGBT institutional structures can expose the hateful underbelly of these movements, there is still hope. In each of our research experiences, we found evidence of pro-queer social change: Tina in the way that anti-gay movements energized and shaped lesbian and gay activism; Melanie in the ways that increased contact with lesbians and gay men led many to change their opinions. A decade later, we can look back to see that these glimmers of hope actually led to real social change. Keeping an eye on the prize is ultimately the best way to negotiate the dark spaces of studying anti-LGBT activism.

## **Conclusion**

Research on subjects who are not only anti-LGBT, but who are activists against social inclusion, civil rights, and personal expression of LGBT and queer people is important, valuable work in the social sciences. Without a cogent and accurate understanding of the resources, discourses, strategies, and identities that support anti-LGBT politics, social science will be disadvantaged in its analysis of queer politics and social change. Studying the anti-LGBT right offers unique insights and opportunities to advance knowledge, but it also poses challenges to researchers, some of which we have discussed here. Problems of fitting in, awkward interactions, and the darkness of immersing oneself in a setting or a set of ideas that are antithetical to a researcher's deep beliefs are three examples that we expect to grapple with in the field. In some cases, the standard advice found in methods texts is useful: being a good listener, opening yourself to your

research subject, remaining critically reflexive of your own social position and identity. These are all important tools to develop to collect data from anti-LGBT research subjects. In other cases, however, we need to develop specific tools and strategies to deal with our unique research projects.

Above, we offer some food for thought about the practices of studying the anti-LGBT right. Like other work that explores painful inequalities and mistreatment of groups and individuals, it can require particular attention to the needs of the researcher. At the same time, this work advances social scientific knowledge in a key understudied area, contributing an important piece of the puzzle of understanding social change, or the resistance to change, over time. We want to affirm that this type of research can also be personally fulfilling. The discovery and careful documentation of right-wing activism gives us the opportunity to expand sociological inquiry into less explored territories, chronicle and analyze this worldview, and understand key aspects of resistance to social change. Collecting and analyzing this data helps us develop a much richer understanding of the social, cultural, institutional barriers to LGBT equality, social inclusion and full citizenship. This research makes unique contributions to sociological knowledge. As Arlene Stein reminds us, the anti-LGBT sentiment at the forefront of people's actions may be connected to and caught up with other social and economic forces that influence ideas and identities. Having a deep understanding of anti-LGBT sentiment gives us insight into its root causes and reveals the path through them to positive social change.



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