Pedagogies of Discomfort and Care: Balancing Critical   
Tensions in Delivering Gender-Related Violence Training to Youth Practitioners

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**Abstract:** This reflective paper explores the emotions, ethics, and challenges of facilitating training for youth practitioners to tackle gender-related violence (GRV). This paper draws on insights from a training intervention that emerged from an EU-funded feminist project (UK GAPWORK project), which sought to bring together approaches to tackle violence against women and girls with challenging heteronormativity and homophobia. Drawing on accounts from facilitators and participants, the aim of this paper is to identify tensions, opportunities and strategies in developing training to support critically engaged practice around sensitive topics such as GRV, and to consider the significance of working with discomfort within any such training intervention. We reflect on how discomfort presented within the training space and the challenges presented. This paper examines how Boler’s theoretical work on pedagogy of discomfort can be operationalised to think productively about designing and delivering training for informal educators on sensitive issues with ethical integrity.

1. Introduction

Thisreflectivepaperexplorestheemotions,ethics,andchallengesoffacilitatingtrainingongender relatedviolence(GRV)withyouthpractitioners.WeexplorethecomplexitiesoffacilitatinganddesigningaspecifictraininginterventionforyouthpractitionerstorecogniseandtackleGRV.ThetrainingemergedfromanEU-fundedfeministproject(UKGAPproject)aimedatbringingtogetherapproachestotackleviolenceagainstwomenandgirlswithchallengingheteronormativityandhomophobia.

Thispaperisconcernedwiththerealmofemotionswithintrainingdynamicsandtherepercussionsforethicallyengagedpedagogy.WereflectonkeylearningfromtheUKGAPprojectwiththeaimofidentifyingtensions,opportunitiesandstrategiesindevelopingtrainingtosupportcriticallyengagedpracticearoundsensitivetopicssuchasGRV,toconsiderhowdiscomfortpresentsandwhatresponsibilitiestrainersandparticipantshavetowardsoneanotherwithinthisprocess.Thispaperasks:Howmightsocialjusticeeducatorsdevelopethicallyresponsiveand discomfortingtrainingintacklinggender-relatedviolence?

Theoretically,thispaperdrawsonBoler’sconceptofthepedagogyofdiscomfort[1]inordertoconsidertheemotionalandethicalcomplexitiesofworkonhighlysensitiveandtroublingtopics.Zembylas[2]drawsattentiontotheethicaldilemmasimplicitinbringingdiscomforttoeducationwhenexploringissuesofsocialjustice,whichalsoprovidesanimportanttheoreticalorientation.Thisarticlebeginsbyoutliningthetrainingcontext,beforeexploringhowdiscomfortpresentedwithintheUKGAPtrainingprogrammeandthechallengesthispresented.Secondly,drawingonreflectionsfromthetraining,weexaminehowBoler’sandZembylas’stheoreticalworkcanbeoperationalisedtothinkproductivelyaboutdesigningtrainingforinformaleducatorsonsensitiveissueswithethicalintegrity.Finally,wearekeentomapoutthepotentialimplicationsoftakingdiscomfortandcareseriouslywhenengaginginsocialjusticeeducationandtrainingwithinformaleducatorstowardsoneof‘criticalhope’[3].Theaccountpresentedarisesfrominterviewswithtrainers,focusgroupreflectionsandfinally,areflectiveaccountfromoneofthetrainersandco-authorsofthispaper.

*2.* SettingtheContext:TheGAPProject

Co-fundedbytheEU,the24monthGAPWORKprojectraninfourdifferentEUcountries(UK,Ireland,SpainandItaly)between2013 and 2015.Here,weparticularlyexploretheexperiencesoftrainersandpractitionersontheUKarmoftheprogramme.TheGAPprojectattemptedtolinkpracticalworkinfluencedbyidentitypoliticsandfeministanti-violenceinitiativeswiththeoreticalworkdrawingoncriticalpedagogies,Queerandfeministpost-structuralisttheory.TheGAPprojectsoughttobridgegapsandunderstandingsofgenderandviolenceinrelationtoadultsandchildservicesandconceptionsofdomesticviolenceandhomophobicviolenceandabuse[4,5].‘Thebroaddefinitionofgender-relatedviolenceproblematisedtheviolenceofnormativities,aswellasmaterialformsofviolence,irrespectiveofwhowastargeted’[5](p.3).

Eachnationalcontextautonomouslyd­­­­esignedanddevelopedlocaltraininginterventionstosupportyouthpractitionersintacklingGRV.Here, wepresentdatathatemergedfromfocusgroupdiscussionsandtrainerreflectionsoncriticalmomentswithintheUKtraining,ratherthanapan-projectanalysis.TheuseofpedagogyofdiscomfortasananalyticaltoolhasonlybeendrawnsofarintheUKcontext.Thispaperseekstounpackthesecriticalmicromomentsinordertoconsiderhowhierarchiesofpower/knowledgeandexpertisewerecontestedandreflectedthecomplexsex-genderdynamicsbetweentrainersandparticipantswithinandoutsidetheUKtrainingprogramme.ThispaperprimarilyconcentratesonDayOneofthethree-dayprogrammetitled‘UnpackingGender*-*RelatedViolence’,asitappearedtoelicitthegreatestlevelofdiscomfortofthethreedaysinthetrainers’andtheparticipants’accounts(seeTable 1).

**Table 1.** The UK training programme.

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|  | **Day 1** | **Day 2** | **Day 3** |
| **Content** | **Unpacking Gender-Related Violence** | **Promoting Healthy Relationships and Sex and the Law** | **Action Planning** |
|  | Focus on sex-gender as categories  Define gender-related violence  Inform to Act process | Focus on GRV and healthy relationships  Legal context and remedies map for victims of abuse | Focus on reviewing GRV resources and action planning for local context |

2.1. The Training Team

TheUKtrainingteamincorporatedayouthworkorganisation,afeministlaworganisationandaUniversityteam.Trainershadexpertiseinfeministandanti-violenceyouthwork,healtheducation,diversitytrainingandthelaw.TrainingwasgroundedinbothgenderstudiesandthelawincludingtheEqualityAct[6],whilstalsobeingflexibletoengagewiththeorganisationalimperativesofthedeliverysettings.Thisbroughttogethercontrastingand,attimes,competingperspectives.Asimplecharacterisationofthesecompetingperspectivesisthat,ontheonehand,secondwavefeministandpost-structuralistandqueertheoreticalinfluencestookadeconstructiveapproachwhichsoughttochallengegenderhierarchiesandmakelesscertainacceptedindividualandpracticeunderstandings,whilstontheotherhand,thelegaland(neo) managerialinfluenceshadastrongerorientationtowardsthepursuitofcertaintyinbothcontentandtrainingoutcomes.

2.2. The Training Design and Participants

TheUKprojectdesignwasofferedovertwoandhalfdaysforprofessionalsworkingwithyoungpeople.Over128participantscompletedtheUKprogramme.Participantshailedfromarangeofdiverseculturalandpracticebackgroundsandlevelsofexperience,includingtraineesandexperiencedmanagersinarangeofyouthprofessionsincluding primaryandsecondaryteaching,youthwork,fireservice,sportscoaches,socialworkandnurses.Thismeantaconsiderabletimecommitmentfromtheemployerandthestaff.Althoughmanyyouthpractitionerselectedtoattendthetraining,othersweremandatedbecausetheirlocalauthorityemployerhadchosentomakethistrainingcompulsory.Wereflectlaterhowthismixofvoluntaryandcompulsoryparticipationshapedtheexperiencesofindividualsandgroupswithinthetrainingsessions.

DayOneandthefinalhalfdaywereledbytheyouthworkorganisationandtheyouthworkacademics.DayTwowasledbyafeministlegalorganisationandwasprimarilyaimedathighlightinglegaldimensionsandremediestoissuessuchaschildsexualexploitationandharassment.Thefirstdayofferedanintroductiontotheconceptofgender-relatedviolence..Participantswereencouragedtoreflectuponthelimitsofnormativesex-genderbinaries,beforeexploringarangeofcasestudiesofgender-relatedviolence,andthenbeingintroducedtoandtheInform to Actprocess(seeFigure 1).***Inform to Act***isanassessmentresourcethatwasdevelopedintheUKcontextinordertoprovideanauditingtoolinidentifyingandtakingactionongender-relatedviolence.Thisincludedanexplorationoftheoverlapsbetweeninequalitiesandviolenceandthescopeforsuchissuestobepresentwithinworkplacesandorganisations,andnotjustamongsttheyoungpeoplethatthepractitionersworkedwithand,assuch,itlinkedthepersonalandprofessionaltotheinstitutionalandsocietal.

Table

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**Figure 1.** Day One—Inform to Act process.

Attheendofthefinalday,participantswereinvitedtocontributetoagroupevaluationwheretheyreflectedonwhattheyhadgainedfromtheexperienceandareasthatmightbestrengthened.Participantscompletedpre-andpost*-*questionnairesfocusingontheirwork base,andtrainingexperience.Formoreonthefullevaluation,seetheGAPWORKreportswhichprovideasummaryofeachcontext[5].Inaddition,theresearchteamobservedthesessionandtrainerswereinterviewed.Thisarticleiswrittenbyoneofthecoordinatorsofthetraining,FinCullen,andoneofthetrainers,MichaelWhelan.Ourpersonalexperiencesasresearchers,youthpractitionersandeducatorsareentwinedinourreflectionandrepresentationinthispaper.Thedatapresentedherearisefromthefollowingsources:GAPWORKreports[5],post-trainingUKfocusgroupwithparticipants,individualinterviewswiththeUKtrainingteamandpersonalreflectionsfromthetrainingteamandauthors.

Here,wefocusonissuesofchallengeandtension,whichmostcommonlyemergedonDayOneandweresubsequentlyraisedinthegroupdiscussiononthefinalday,oramongstfocuseddiscussionwiththeresearcher.Itisperhapsunsurprisingthatareasofpotentialdiscomfortmightemergeontheopeningday.Muchrecenttrainingandcontinuousprofessionaldevelopmentinpublicsectororganisationshasmovedtoanonlineself-completionformatorentailsbriefhalf-dayinformation-ledtrainingonissuessuchaschildsexualexploitation.GAPWORKUKadoptedamulti-daytrainingapproachandincludedreflectiononthepersonal,theprofessional,andtheinstitutional,aswellasinformationsharingwhichhadthepotentialtofeel‘discomforting’andpotentiallypersonallyandprofessionallyexposing.Onlinetraining,bycontrast,ismarkedbyitsrelativecosteffectiveness,andespeciallyforasynchronousself-completedcontent,typicallyresultsinatrainingexperiencewhichismoreimpersonalinnatureandnegatestheemotionalmessinessofabroader‘educational’experience.Onlinetrainingcanseemlessmessy,saferandmoreboundariedthanformsofface-to-facetrainingwhichemphasisedialogueandcriticalreflectiononpracticeasatrainingresource.DayOneplacedthisformofcriticalreflectioncenterstage—byquestioningthesex-genderbinaryandtaken-for-grantedassumptionsaboutreassuringessentialistcategoriesthatmightoffercertaintyandsolace.Forexample,thesex-genderbinaryassumesthatsexandgenderareimmutabledualisticcategories.DayOne’sopeningactivityinvitedparticipantstoreflectonthefluidityandculturalcontingencyofsuchcategoriesinthinkingthrough“What makes a man, a man? Or a woman, a woman?”Thisframedthesubsequenttrainingwithinthisdeconstructivesensibilitywhichquestionscommonsenseassumptionsaboutthefixityofbinarysex,genderandsexuality.Thisapproach,perhapsunsurprisingly,promptedparticipantstoreflectontheirpersonalandorganisationalvaluebasesandelicitedpersonaldisclosures.

Thetwo-and-half-daymodelprovidedtheapparentluxuryofdivingdeeperintothevariousoverlappingstrandsofgender-relatedviolence.However,italsomeantthatunderstaffedworkplacesfacingstarkausteritycutswereleftwithoutstaffforseveraldays.Thelocalauthoritypartnerssentmanyoftheirstafftothecourseasmandatedtrainingaddinganadditionallayerofcomplexitytounderstandingandworkingwithaspectsofthediscomfortexperiencedwithinthetraining.Asonetrainernoted:

*The issue of forced attendance appears to keep coming up through the training day, impacting not just on the reluctant attendee but also the rest of the attendees.* [5] (p. 70)

Forsome,especiallythosewhohadbeenmandatedtoattend,materialscouldseemobscure,irrelevant,anddiscomforting.Yet, withoutpublicsectororganisationstakingissuesofequalitiesandsocialjusticeseriously,theyareinbreachofrecentUKequalitieslegislation[6].Moreover,ifsocialjusticetrainingonly‘preachestotheconverted’thenitrisksremainingamarginalandmarginalisedissueoflimitedinterest,andwilllittletroubleexistingworkplacehierarchiesthatreproduceproblematicandunjustworkplacecultures;letalonebegintochallengesuchissueswithinclientgroups.Indeed,thiswasreflectedinthelegaltrainer’saccountwhichnotedthatcriminaljusticeworkersexpressedlittleinterestinpromotingpositiverelationshipaspectsofthetrainingastheyfeltthiswasbeyondtheremitandlocioftheirpractice.

*These practitioners only wanted to engage on a limited number of issues and did not see themselves as people who could/would provide a more positive vision of a young person’s engagement in relationships.* [5] (p. 69)

Here,itisevidentthatexpectations,conceptionsofpractice,professionalityandclientgroupwereentwined.Suchframingsalsoshapedexpectationsofwhatmightbedeemedasalegibleandlegitimatetrainingexperience*—*issuesthatwewillreturnlaterinthispaper.Weturnfirstlytotheconceptandethicsofdiscomfortandcareandhowthismaymanifestineducationandtraininginterventionsthatexploreissuesofsocialjustice.

*3.* IntroducingaPedagogyofDiscomfort

ThispaperdrawsuponBoler’sconceptualisationofpedagogyofdiscomfort [1]toanalysethetrainingprocessandexperience.Boler’sworkhasbeenfruitfullydrawnonbyscholarsinterrogatinghowcriticalpedagogymaycrossoverintotheemotionalrealmwhenencounteringandchallenginginjustice—especiallyinteachereducationandbeyond.Boler’sworkprovidesapowerfulaccountofhowtheemotional—inthecaseof‘discomfort’—canmotivatelearnersanddisrupthegemonicnarrativesthatreproducesocialinjustice.Bolerdefinestheconceptofpedagogyofdiscomfort‘…asbothaninvitationtoinquiryaswellasacalltoaction’ [1](p.176).Thecollectiveexplorationenablesnewinsightsandformsnewwaysofbeing *and* doing.Suchpedagogydoesnotprescribeaction,butthroughcollectivewitnessinginvitesdialogueandnewwaysofimaginingpractice(action).EventhoughBoler’sworkdidnottheoreticallyunderpintheoriginaldesignofthistrainingprogramme,ithelpsinunderstandingandreflectingonthearisingcomplexitiesandkeylearning.Indeed,DayOnewasclearlyaninvitationtoinquirybeforemovingtoaction,ascanbeclearlyseeninthemovementandemphasisonDayOnethroughtoDayThreeasnotedinTable 1.

TheaspectsthatarekeytoBoler’s[1]conceptualisationare

* Spectating versus Witnessing;
* Understanding and exploring anger;
* Avoiding the binary trap of innocence and guilt;
* Learning to inhabit ambiguous selves [1].

Wedrawontheseelementsasweunpackareasoftensionthataroseduringthedeliveryandproductionofthetraining.

Keyhereistheroleofquestioningandreflectionwithintherealmofemotion,particularlywhenexploringcontentiousissuessuchasgenderinequalities.Asanimportantpedagogictool,itcanbeusedasastrategytodrawouttensions,andexploresometimesdifficultfeelingsinordertogaincollectivepersonalandprofessionalinsights.Suchpracticesdemandahighdegreeofemotionallabourforallparticipants.Bolernotesthatoneofthemostchallengingarenasforsuchcollectivediscomfortisthatofracialandsexualoppression [1].Withthisinmind,itisperhapsunsurprisingthata2.5daytrainingsessiononsexualandgenderviolencewouldprovideaspaceofparticularemotionalchallenge.

Suchthornyethicalandpedagogicaltensionshavebeenexploredbyvariousscholars[1,7].Priorworkhastheorisedthearisingdilemmasposedbysocialjusticeeducationandcriticalpedagogyandthenatureoftherelationbetweenthepedagogue/participants.Previousscholarshipexploringtheareaofteachingandcriticalpedagogyhasattemptedtotheorisehowtheemotionalandtheethicalentwinewithintheclassroom[1,2,7–9].Thispaperdepartsfromthisscholarshipaswearelookingspecificallyatthetrainingspace;yetsuchpriorworkisalsorelevantandapplicabletotheorisingwork-basedtraining.However,itisalsorecognisedthateducationandtrainingdifferinregardsorientation,approachandexpectations.Thecriticalengagementwiththeoryandthedesiretocultivatespacesofcriticaldialogue,reflectionandinquiryintheUKGAPtrainingmodelshowsacleardeparturefromnarrowtaskandskillorientatedtrainingapproacheswhichoftenpredominateinthefield.

Earlierscholarshiphasoftenexaminedtheemotionalandethicaldilemmasengenderedwithineducationforsocialjusticewithinformaleducationsettings.Forexample,theprogressiveclassroomisnotnecessarilyoneofsafety[10].AsMorley—writinginauniversitywomanstudiescontext—argues,discussionsofsex/genderoppressioncancreateunsafetensespacesandnecessitateincreasedemotionallabourfromfeministpedagogueswhoarerequiredtomanagethemicropoliticsoftheclassroomexperience.Yet, thechallengehereisthemovetobringfeministandcriticalpedagogiesintoaworkplacetrainingmodel—wheretheongoingsupport,emotionallabourandcarefulnuancedreflectionand‘collectivewitnessing’[1]onareasofchallengeandcontestationaresqueezedintoa2.5dayprogramme.

Someparticipantsweremandatedbytheiremployertoattendtrainingworkshopsduringcompanytimeandagain,the‘expert’facilitator/trainerestablishestheparametersoftheagendaandleadstheparticipantsinacquiringthesetlearningobjectivesandpotentiallyassessestheircompetency.Suchsimplisticconceptualisationsofcontentandprocessofworkexploringissuesofsocialjusticefailstoengagewiththemyriadcomplexitiesandsubjectivitiesthatarebroughtintobeingwithin,throughandoutsidetrainingspace.Moreover,theverynatureofthistraining/educationongender/sexualitiesequalitiesandgender-relatedviolenceisrightlydiscomfortingandyet,participantsmaybereluctantinbothengagingwiththecontentandprocessoftraining;particularlyiftheyhavebeencompelledtoattend.

Theemotionalrealmandfeelingofdiscomfortandambiguityframeddiscussionofchallengingissuessuchasgender-relatedviolence.Participantswereaskedtoreflectontheirownassumptionsandinvestments.Forexample,bybeingpromptedtocriticallyreflectonthepresenceofviolenceandgenderinequalityintheirownactionsandrelations,inadditiontoconsideringtheirorganisationalcultures.Thischallengedlearnerstoconsiderhowtheirprofessionalroleandtheirownvaluesmightbecomplicitinreproducingproblematicnormsandsustaininginequalities.Secondly,the *call* *to* *action* dimensionemphasisedoperationalisingwhatlearnersmightdonextinregardspolicyandpracticeareasintheirworkplace.

Viadiscomfortingpedagogies,learnersconfrontsocialnorms.Yet, atthesametime,whilepedagogiescanhavetransformativeandradicalpotential,withoutduecare,italsorisksreinforcingandsolidifyingexistingidentities,ratherthanshiftingthedebateinchallenginginjustice.Forexample,onechallengehereistrainingparticipants’ownembodiedandpositionedsubjectivities.Areasofpotentialtensionincludeparticipants’ownexperiencesassex-genderedsubjects,butalsoasemployeesinhighlyhierarchicalstructuresandneoliberalpolicyregimes,canoftenfeelintenselydisempowering.Everyoneisinvestedinthetopicathand;yetnotallmightfeelthattheycanbeanagenticsubjectwithinsuchhierarchicalorganisationalandinstitutionalsystems.Asaresult,suchfeltpowerlessnesscanresultinlearnersdwelling ondiscomfort,andthusrisksapathy,antagonismordisengagement,ratherthanaclear‘calltoaction’emergingfromthetrainingintervention.

Zembylas’workspeakstothethemesexploredinBoler’sworkintheorisingandconceptualisingaspectsoftheemotional,theethicalandcriticalpedagogy.ReflectingonBoler’spedagogyofdiscomfort,ZembylasandMcGlynn[8]explorethelimitsandpossibilitiesof(dis)comfortandnotepotentialissuesofsafetyandriskforlearnersandteachersalike[8].Indeed,pertinentethicalquestionsconcerntheappropriatenessofsuchcontextualpedagogies;especiallyastheymayhavedifferentialimpactonlearners.Ratherthanabandoningsuchdiscomfortingpedagogies,Zembylasquestionshowweprovidespacesofcontrolandsupportwithinsuchlearningcontextsinanargumentfor *critical* pedagogies of compassion[2,9].Thisargumentisframedaroundhoweducatorsengagewithchallengingissuesofsufferingthatmovebeyondthoseofsimplesentimentalisingormoralisticframings[9](p.507).Indeed,suchsimplisticframingscanreinforcereductivenarrativeswherelearnersrefute,reject,contestorblockengagementwithsuchissues.ForZembylas,thismanifestsitselfinarangeofphenomenonthatcanariseintheclassroomforlearnersconfrontedwithchallengingissuesexploringsocialinjustice,fromstudentsexperiencingcompassionfatigue,becomingindifferent,expressingemotionalresistanceand/orcreatingnarrativesofself-victimisation.Duecaretotheconditionsoflearninginadditiontotrainingcontentisthusvitaltomovelearnersbeyondsimplisticbinariesofthemandus,throughanengagementwithacriticalcompassionthatprovidesscopeforlearnerstograspasymmetriesofsuffering[9](p. 507).

SuchissuesarecentraltotheGAPtraining’scommitmentinexploringthebanalityandubiquityofgenderedeverydayviolenceasinstitutionalisedthroughheteropatriarchynotjustinthelivesofchildrenandyoungpeople,butalsointhelivesofthetrainingparticipants,theirfamilies,colleaguesandtheinstitutionsandstructuresinhabitedbybothyoungpeopleandpractitioners.Suchapedagogicmoveisoneofpotentialriskanddanger.WhileonlyDayOneparticularlyfocusedondeconstructingandquestioningsex-gendernorms,issuesaroundhomophobiaandthemesofgenderedviolenceranthroughoutandprovidedadestabilisingpresencethatpresentedconsiderablechallengesandunease.Thenextsectionexploressomeoftheemergingtensionsthataroseduringthetrainingsessionsandtheimportanceofsuchcriticalmomentsinconsideringwhatconstitutesa‘successful’trainingprogramme.

*4.* AnInvitationtoInquiry

Whilethefocuswasthatofcombatinggender-relatedviolence,itwasclearthatpractitionersalsoworkwithinorganisationswhichreproducebroaderdiscoursesofsystematicandinstitutionaloppression.Muchscholarlyworkhasexploredthechallengesofworkplacebullyingandharassment[11–13].Post*-*austeritypublicservicesinEnglandhaveseensavagecutstojobs,trainingandsupportforyouthpractitionersandincreasinglyprecariousandunderstaffedworkingconditions[14–16].Moreover,agrowingliteraturehasexploredthecomplexitiesofpractitionersnegotiatingheteronormativityintheworkplace[17–19].Suchworknotestheengrainedheterosexistorganisationalculturesandmanagementregimesthatsilencesandmarginalisedsuchpractitioners’experiences.Eventhemostapparentprogressiveworkplacecanbeframedwithinrepressiveorganisationculturesthatinvisibilises,marginalisesandsilencesworkerandserviceuserexperiencesofoppression.

OnDayOne,facilitatorsmovedtodrawoncasestudiesandinstitution-basedactivities,yetthefirstmorningbroughtthepersonalandtheprofessionaltogetherinreflectingonunderstandingofkeyissuesandcapacitytoact.Thepersonalis *both* politicalandpowerful.Experientiallearningmotivatesthisspiritofinquiryandearlytrainingactivitiesinvitedparticipantstoconfrontandreflectontheirownassumptions.Onreflection,itisclearthatparticipantswerethusencouragedto‘dwellindiscomfort’[1]andambiguitythroughcriticalreflectioninordertogainnewinsightswhichcouldbethendrawnoninthesubsequentdays’workshops,wherelegalimplicationsofGRVandactionplanningwerethemainfoci.

Boler[1]notesthisasthroughengagingwithcomplexissueswelearntolivewithourambiguousselves.Whileexposingordwellingonthesecomplexitiescanpotentiallythreatentoerodelong-investedpersonal/professionalidentities.Indeed,personaldisclosuresduringthetrainingofprofessionals’experiencingfirst-handgender-relatedviolenceintheirpersonallifebegantodismantlebarriers.However,suchdisclosuresalsopotentiallyriskedexposinganddestabilisingcarefullycraftedprofessionalpersonasforonesofbothpersonalvulnerabilityandstrength.

Participantsworkingwithyoungpeopletotacklegender-relatedviolencemightalsofaceavarietyofformsofdirectandindirectviolencethemselves,fromstructuralandinstitutionalformsofoppressiontocasesofinterandintrapersonalviolencefromcolleaguesandclients.Suchviolencemighttakearangeofformsfrommicroaggressionstoongoingbullyingorheterosexistnormsthatsilenceandmarginalise.Participantsthusalreadyinhabitcomplex—andsometimescontradictoryandambiguous*—*positions asexpert/learner,asrescuer/victim,aspersecuted/persecutingwithentwinedpersonalandprofessionalidentitiesandsubjectivitiespotentiallyremadeandrecast,reformedandquestioned.

Twinthemesofvoiceandsilenceshapedthesedynamics.Whilethetrainingactivitiesprovidedavaluedsiteofreflectionandtestimonyforsome,thiswasnotthecaseforall.Thisusualsilencingofexperiences/identitieswithintheofficemadethetemporaryspaceofthetrainingroomaparticularlytrickyprofessionalsitewheresuchdiscussionsandidentitiesweremadelegibleandrenderedvisible.Diversityprogrammescancreateaspaceofbacklashwhereparticipantswishtomarginaliseorsuggestthatsuchissuesarerelicsofthepast[1,2,7].Yet, othersmightfeelthisongoingerasurefurthermarginalisesandsilencestheirpersonalidentity.Inthisway,thetrainingroom,ratherthanbecomingasafespacetoinvestigatetheneedsofthe‘other’,becameasiteofongoingtensionandnegotiationaboutpersonalandprofessionalidentitiesandsitesandsystemsofoppression.Infocusgroupaccounts,itwasclearthatcertaintopicsandissuesaroundoppressionwereseenastoo‘hot’fortheofficeandstaffexpressedcautionaboutraisingissuesforfearofpersonalandprofessionalconsequences.Forexample,duringfocusgroupdiscussions,LGBTQstaffpresentnotedthechallengesofdealingwithworkplacehomophobia.Asonewomannoted:

…we do go (sighs) round and round in circles in our office, cos no matter whatever you say or challenge, it always comes back in your face, and particularly me, being a gay person, if I challenged something that I feel or find offensive or shouldn’t be said in our office, I’m always aware that it’s me that’s saying it and are they just thinking, oh it’s her on her high horse again…., whereas I just think it’s harder to challenge something around gay equality cos then it is necessarily against racial politics <> I am aware that, yeah, I am cautious sometimes because I’m aware of…what I’m gonna get back, does that make sense? (UK training participant)

Here,issuesofgender,sexualityandracein/equalitytakeondifferentcharacteristicsandlevelsofimportanceandrecognitionintheworkplaceasnotedintheEqualityAct(2010) [6].Thismeant,forexample,thatoutgaymembersofstafffeltburdenedwithraisingissuesaroundworkplacehomophobia.Participantaccountssuggestedconcernaboutdrawingattentiontohomophobicandheterosexistworkplacecultureforfearofbeingperceivedashectoringandfacingfurtherstigmatisation.Moreover, ‘beingagayperson’meantthattheagendawasparticularlychargedasitoftenappearedthatheterosexualstafffeltlessactiveinchallengingorevenrecognisinghomophobicandheterosexismpresentintheworkplace.Thekeyarisingquestionhereiswhoownstheproblemandhowisitmobilised?

Thetrainingexperiencecouldbeatrickyspace—particularlyifonewasbeingtrainedalongsideworkmates.Indeed,workplacedynamicscouldspillbackintothetrainingroomandviceversa,aswashighlightedbyanotherparticipant:

I don’t mind challenging most things, but this topic is quite a sensitive one and especially in the workplace, it’s one thing to challenge outside when you’re with your family or your friends but amongst colleagues the repercussions are quite different. (UK training participant)

ThesecommentsarosepartlyfromtheInform to Actprocess(seeFigure 1)thatinvolvedparticipantsreflectingontheirownworkplacesandhowgender-relatedviolencecouldbenormalisedaspartofeverydayworkcultures.Therewasclearrecognitionamongstparticipantsthatsuchissuesaroundsex-genderoppressionwasapparentinofficeplacedynamics—yethowindividualswerepositionedandpolicedwithinwiderwork-basedhierarchiesmightpreventdisclosureandchallenge.Indeed,anotherparticipantpresentednegotiatingsuchissuesintheworkplaceashavingmuchincommonwithplayinga‘gameofchess’inknowinghowandwhentoreactandchallengecolleaguesandoppressiveworkplacecultures.

*5.* AngerIsanEnergy

Emotionallabourliesattheheartofexploringissuesofsocialjusticeanddifference.AsWilliams[20]notesinhisconceptof‘structuresoffeelings’, dominantsocialrelationsmeansthatthehegemonicnormsareinternalisedwithintheemotionalrealm[21].Throughcollectivewitnessing,learnersareencouragedtomovebeyondthe‘inscribedemotionalandculturalterrains’ofthosecomfortzonestothinkdifferently[21](p. 107).

Criticalinquiryoftenmeansexploringdifficultemotionalterrainanddifficultemotions.Multipleformsofangercanmanifestwithinsuchsessions.Whilstnotsellingprescriptivedogmaticsolutions,theveryambiguityofconsideringnewwaysofbeingcanengenderanger.Thismightemergefromanunsettlingand‘moralanger’atsocialinjustice—ora‘defensive’anger—asfragileidentitiesandinvestmentscomeunderscrutiny [1].Indeed,permutationsofthesedifferentaspectsofangermaybeinplayinthesameeducationalspaceandsometimeswithinthesameperson—whetherlearnerortrainer.

Unsurprisingly,suchdynamicsplayedoutonoccasioninthetrainingroom.Thismightappearbyresistance,reluctance,sabotageand/ordisengagement,andisalsopotentiallylinkedheretowhetherindividualshadattendedtrainingfromtheirownvolitionorbecausetheyweremandatedbymanagers.Forexample,trainersontheGAPteamnotedthatdiscussionsofviolenceandpatriarchycreatedfeelingsofcollectivediscomfortand‘violent’reactionsfromparticularlymaleparticipants.

<Participants> thought they were coming into a training which is very much about the legal aspect of it and learning more about violence, and I think when we started to unpick patriarchy a little bit, and that started to threaten them, there were very specific incidences where they started to react violently themselves. (Trainer/coordinator—Day Three)

Suchdiscomfortandangercascadeinmultipledirectionsbetweentrainingparticipantsandtowardstrainers.Thisisnotunexpectedwhenexploringsuchemotiveandsensitiveissuesbutithadclearimplicationsfortrainingdesignandintent.Trainersreflecteduponthecomplexityofnegotiationbetweenindividualandinstitutionalneedandexpectations.Forexample,twotrainersnotedmomentsoftensionthathadarisenwheremaleparticipantsvoicedantagonismtosomeoftheideaspresentedbyfemaletrainersand/orparticipants.Severaltrainersnotedagenderdynamicinplayinthetrainingspacewhereoldermenquestionedaccountsbyyoungerwomentrainers.

..sort of deliberately challenging you on whether this is something that really was important to be looked at and y’know or saying that or completely dismissing sexism against women as even being something that’s a problem anymore... (Trainer—Day One)

Thisdiscomfortreflectscontemporarydiscoursesshapedbypost-feministcritiquesthatdiminish,negate,orrefutethecontinuingexistingcorrosiveheterosexismandpatriarchy[22,23].Byinterrupting,changingthetopic,workingofftopicorengaginginmonologuesaboutthenatural‘fact’ofgenderinequality,suchtacticsfurthersilencedandoppressedotherlesscombativemembersofthegroup.Suchgenderedaspectsalsomeantthatgenderidentitiescameintoplay.Forexample,onemaletrainerfeltitnecessarytointerveneanddemonstratehisroleasapoliticalallywiththefemaletrainermid-sessiononDayTwo,notingthathewouldbeheardandtakenmoreseriouslybytheresistantmalemembersofthegroups.Thisactioncreatedfurthercomplexityashereflectedthatitmomentarilyreproducednormativeandproblematicgenderroleswithintheteam

Discomfortingtopicscreatemomentsofchallengeandcomplexitythatquestionindividuals’senseofselforworldorder,andmaycreatenegativefeelingofdiscomfortortension.Theissuefacedhereishowtomaintainthebalancebetweenempowermentanddiscomfortinacaringandcompassionateway.Asthelaunchingpoint,forthetrainingwastounpack(hetero)normativeassumptionsandvalues,participantsfelttheirowninvestmentsandidentitieswereunderattack.Here,theemphasisisonthetrainingteamengagingwiththeethicalandpedagogicalcomplexityatthedesignstage.Forexample,thetrainer-coordinatoronDayThreeconsideredtheethicaldimensionsofaskingparticipantstoexploretheirownidentitiesandreflecteduponthearisingresistancewhenidentitieswerequestioned:

I would build in more reflection time to day one and day two on very specifically the question of, how does this apply to your setting, and limit it at that and not really asking people to challenge their own identities, because I think where we did open that avenue of exploration, there was often a very violent resistance, especially from masculine identities that were being heavily critiqued within that. (Trainer/coordinator—Day 3)

Indeed, while we draw on pedagogy of discomfort as a tool of analysis here, it also is a helpful design tool in developing future training interventions. For example, recognising the ethical and emotional aspects of discomfort enables participants and trainers alike to negotiate both moral and defensive anger as a way to understand how pedagogies of discomfort destabilise invested identities and open up new lines of rupture.

The issue emerges of how to work with such (defensive) anger. Without due care, from the educator, it can spiral into disengagement and a hollow sense of guilt and shame, neither of which are productive. There are few simple answers here. The ethical-emotional components are perhaps about educators being open about the process, the precarity to move beyond simple prescriptive solutions, binaries of guilt—so dwell with ambiguity—before calling to action and possible future selves. Here lies Zembylas’ notion of critical pedagogies of compassion [9]. This has implications for the worldview and the experience of the trainer. An issue that we reflect in the next section where Michael reflects on how the work of Boler helps him understand the complexities of designing and delivering such training.

6. Reflections from the Author/Trainer

This section offers a reflection from one of the authors, Michael, who was the lead trainer on Day One. There are two related points worth noting before offering some reflections on the training. The first is that my role within the training was contained to developing and delivering the training, so I was not a member of the wider GAP project research team. The second related point is that in undertaking this reflective exercise with my co-author, who was a member of the research team, I have done so not just with the benefit of my own memories of the training experience, but also with additional insights from the research data. Insight from the research data has, therefore, enriched the reflective experience, but also highlighted aspects of personal and professional discomfort within the training experience which would have been unlikely to feature so strongly in my own initial recollections.

Although I reflect now on this training experience through a lens of ‘pedagogies of discomfort’, this pedagogy was not central to the planning or delivery of the training. It may seem contradictory but while I was aware that discomfort would be created during the delivery of Day One, I did not view that we were setting out to actively create discomfort. This establishes an important starting point in relation to this reflection and the use of work on pedagogies of discomfort. Boler emphasises the value of her ideas as a resource in the conscious and planned use of discomfort, which was not the case with the training experience being reflected on here. The intention within the reflection, therefore, is not to reflect on the application of Boler’s concept but, rather, to, firstly, highlight some of the challenges that arise when the use of discomfort within an educational intervention is not more effectively planned and considered and, secondly, to consider retrospectively how these insights might help to structure more effective educational practice in working with discomfort around sensitive topics such as GRV.

In developing this training, we set out to achieve an approach to learning which sat somewhere between a ‘training’ and an ‘education’ approach. That is, the problematising of participants’ taken for granted assumptions in relation to gender and violence seemed to be an essential component of the broader training aims and required a pedagogic approach which opened up uncertain spaces of enquiry. On the other hand, there was an expectation that participants, and perhaps more importantly the organisations they work for, would expect more tidy and certain outcomes more commonly associated with a ‘typical’ training experience. To come away from a training session thinking ‘I am now less certain about a lot of things’ is unlikely to be considered a positive outcome. On the other hand, to come away from an educational experience thinking ‘it made me reconsider and question what I thought I knew’ would be less likely to be considered a negative outcome.

A central challenge was the perceived need to bridge the divide between training and education—between a less certain space of critical reflection and enquiry, and the more certain space of an outcomes-oriented training session. My approach in marrying these two competing demands was to use the early part of the training day to open up or ‘unpack’, whilst using the later part of the day to close down or contain and re-orientate towards more certain outcomes. For example, as noted earlier, one of the key opening tasks was an introductory activity that prompted participants to reflect on binary gender by asking them to consider what makes them a man or a woman. This always prompted lively discussions and opened up a level of critical thinking around the ‘fixedness’ of gender identities. By contrast, the language of risk assessment was drawn on in the afternoon session, when participants were asked to reflect on personal and organisational practice and highlight key areas of risk in relation to gender-related violence.

Openings and closings are a part of everyday life and often come with their own level of discomfort, like trying to find an opportunity (or the words) to end a conversation at a social event, or the awkwardness of repeated good-byes in ending a telephone conversation. The scale of discomfort, however, in the context of this training was heavily informed, firstly, by the level of opening up that we viewed as important in order to engage meaningfully with such a sensitive topic and, secondly, by the need (or pressure) for tidy endings or neat categorisations, which (as previously discussed) are increasingly considered an important ‘product’ of training interventions. This left a constrained space between openings and closings, within which there was only limited opportunity to work constructively with the discomfort created in the limited timeframe that was seen as possible within the broader institutional structures.

6.1. Working with Discomfort

One fundamental tension in the core premise of the training stemmed from the mix of mandated and voluntary participation. Where participants attend voluntarily, then those whose value bases are most likely to be challenged by the training (and arguably those you would most want to attend) are least likely to attend. However, if you require of people to attend, then reluctant participants are likely to start the training from a position of greatest discomfort and, possibly, least trust. If one accepts this line of argument, and the view that training of this sort should seek to engage with reluctant participants, then one must also accept that discomfort is not just a product of the training, it is also likely to precede the training and to bubble to the surface throughout.

A basic but important reflection from the training is that experiences of discomfort differed amongst participants, but also amongst trainers. The discomfort experienced by participants and trainers differed based on a range of factors, including characteristics such as age, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. By implication, discomfort in the training room was not evenly distributed. For example, my own observations, and trainee accounts, suggested that expressions of defensive anger in the room were felt much more personally by some than by others. This suggests the need to acknowledge that working with discomfort will be more upsetting and more challenging for some than for others.

Just as experiences of discomfort differed, so too did resulting reactions. As noted earlier, some participants, at times appeared to try to subject others to discomfort in response to their own experiences of discomfort. To put it more simply, some appeared to hit out when they found their value base being challenged. Trainer reactions to such anger or aggression also varied, particularly in relation to when and how to challenge it. As trainers, the absence of a clear strategy in relation to working with discomfort, combined with the drive to achieve the neat categorisations required of training interventions, meant discomfort was often treated as an unhelpful by-product, something to be contained, rather than actively worked with. The planned training left insufficient time to critically reflect and engage with such discomfort in a more meaningful way.

Although trainer and participant experiences point to significant challenges in working constructively with discomfort within a training intervention of this sort, Boler’s [1] work provides helpful principles which might inform such work, and even points to some effective features of the training intervention. Indeed, Boler’s work has proven illuminating in terms of my own understanding and reflections on the design and delivery of the training:

6.2. Spectating versus Witnessing

Boler [1] (p. 194) emphasises the importance of witnessing versus spectating. The distinction here is between viewing but not holding responsibility (spectating) as opposed making more proactive and ethical choices in relation to any abdication of responsibility (witnessing). This links back to the previous reflection on challenges relating to the ‘reluctant’ training participant, which highlighted the importance of the active acceptance of responsibility in achieving a more meaningful dialogue around discomfort.

If we accept that witnessing is unlikely to be achieved by requiring people to attend (or that it is, at the very least, an initial blockage to be overcome) then there are two important implications. Firstly, it suggests that training of this sort cannot be delivered effectively if attendees are mandated to attend. The second implication is that if we are not to exclude all reluctant attenders from such training, the work of moving potential trainees from the position of spectator to witness, must begin outside the training room. That is, delivering training which seeks to critically explore employees’ value bases and prompt a critical examination of organisational cultures, must be done as part of a whole organisational approach. This wider organisational approach must include measures which seek to encourage employees to ‘bear witness’ (as opposed to spectate) and therefore to more proactively engage in spaces of discomfort, from a starting point that is not defined by anger, resentment and eroded trust. This is not to say that these experiences might not be an outcome of the training experience anyway, but that they are less likely to be the starting point for the training.

6.3. Learning to Inhabit Our Ambiguous Selves

Another point emphasised by Boler [1] is the suggestion that a pedagogy of discomfort requires of participants to learn to inhabit their ambiguous selves. This implies an application not just to the challenging task of critically exploring many of the taken for granted beliefs and values which underpin our sense of self, but also the on-going task of holding this uncertain position open. There would have been value in enabling participants to become more skilled (or familiar, at least) with the process of inhabiting their ‘ambiguous selves’ prior to the training, which could have taken the form of some pre-training activities. A starting point for such activities might be an activity prompting reflection on personal values, and this could be extended to involve sharing and discussing these with co-workers.

Any such reflective exercises could prove exposing and would require participants’ considered and proactive engagement, but it would also have implications for the organisations they work for. The ability of employees to commit to holding open fluid and uncertain spaces of critical enquiry suggests the need for wider organisational cultures which would not only facilitate such a process of ‘bearing witness’, but also be able to learn from and respond to such a process. While, the absence of an appropriate organisational context should not prevent the process of bearing witness around difficult but important issues, the challenge it presents for training participants should not be understated.

6.4. Avoiding the Binary Trap of Innocence and Guilt

Boler suggests that in engaging in a pedagogy of discomfort, it is important to avoid the ‘trap’ of positioning participants in the binary categories of innocence and guilt. For a judgement of innocence or guilt to exist, there must be some point of orientation, against which such a judgement might be made. Such a point of orientation, therefore, provides the ability not just to distinguish individuals on the basis of their stated position, but also to cast a view in relation to their stated position—you are against, and to be against is to be wrong and places you in a position of ‘guilt’. Boler is not necessarily questioning the notion of judgement, rather she is problematising the use of judgement in a binary manner. Such binary positioning does not acknowledge the layered, complex, and sometimes contradictory nature of individual’s experiences and perspectives. Rather, in a cruder way, it polarises our view of the innocent or guilty, in a manner that highlights certain attitudes, beliefs or values, and filters out others. Such binary positioning is counterproductive to a key pursuit of a pedagogy of discomfort, that being to open up important, albeit challenging, dialogues around sensitive issues. If a person believes that much of their beliefs or values will be judged (negatively)—the prospect of them engaging meaningfully in such a dialogue is limited. Indeed—they are likely to revert to a position of defensive anger.

If we accept the principle of avoiding the binary trap of innocence and guilt, then it is possible to identify two important features of Day One training which were well aligned with this principle. Firstly, an important starting point for the critical reflection on practice within the training was the assumption that we are all guilty—or at least complicit. That is, it was assumed that there were aspects of all participants’ individual or organisational practice that might be done better or differently. Thus, it was, arguably, more problematic to claim complete innocence than it was to acknowledge guilt. The second important point in relation to the treatment of innocence and guilt on Day One was the use of a continuum, or to be more accurate two continua. Such resources framed risk in relation to GRV as being informed by the intersection of cultures of gender inequality and cultures of violence (see Figure 2). The suggestion was not that these were the only factors affecting GRV, but they provided helpful lenses through which risk might be explored. Participants were, therefore, asked to locate their own practice, or that of their organisation, on two continua. One continuum related to cultures of gender inequality, while the other related to cultures of violence, and the scale ranged from ‘proactively challenged’ to ‘actively reinforced’. The continua (and the scales used) helped to avoid the binary trap of innocence and guilt, but also reinforced the dynamic nature of challenging GRV, and the cultures that enable it.

Graphical user interface, text, application

Description automatically generated

**Figure 2.** GRV continuum located within ‘Inform to Act’ model.

6.5. Understanding and Exploring Anger

The measures discussed above might help in mitigating some initial experiences of anger. However, Boler suggests an inevitability to experiences of anger. In Day One, this anger was experienced by both participants and trainers. It negatively impacted engagement in the training process and even resulted in levels of abusive behaviour. An important contributing factor in relation to the way in which anger was explored (or not), was the constrained space available to do such work, and the absence of a clearer strategy for approaching and facilitating this. However, even with time and a clear strategy, such exploration could be fraught. One example of this challenge is the uneven distribution of anger. Whilst the principle of understanding and exploring anger might seem a worthy aspiration, the implication is that certain groups or individuals are likely to encounter (or be on the receiving end of) greater levels of anger than others. Indeed, there is a real risk that pursuing a pedagogy of discomfort subjects the most vulnerable participants to the greatest level of discomfort. Whilst my reflections here have pointed to some important limitations in our approach to working with discomfort, they have also pointed to the potential value of such work in addition to highlighting some important parameters and practical activities which might be put in place to ensure a less violent approach to working with discomfort.

7. Conclusions—Thinking through and beyond Discomfort

This paper emerges out of a training initiative funded by the EU to support youth practitioners tackle gender-related violence. The subsequent years have seen progress. Young people’s activism from the #MeToo movement to campaigns against street harassment and the Everyone’s Invited campaign—to highlight and campaign against sexual violence in schools—demonstrate the need to ensure gender-related violence is a pressing public and professional concern. Yet, education institutions and child and youth practitioners including teachers, whilst recognising their statutory safeguarding duties, often remain underprepared in how to recognise and take action against toxic gender violent cultures. In addition, many fear taking action, fearing institutional damage in raising the alarm.

This paper reflected on key learning and traced some of the tensions in developing responsive training in the area to support such practitioners. Challenges encountered included clashing perceptions of ‘need’ within neoliberal education and youth settings, which meant that perceptions around the ‘ideal’ content, format, and delivery of sessions on GRV were not always necessarily shared between trainers, employers and frontline practitioners. We argued that the nature of a pedagogy of discomfort requires careful planning, facilitation and reflection, and clear strategies before and after training, and the active buy-in from employers. It also points to some significant challenges in delivering such a piece of training in the context of neo-liberal, target-driven practice cultures, a point which is much more evident when this reflection is located within the wider political and practice context. However, the reflection also points to some important learning that came from the approach adopted. The assumption that ‘we are all guilty’—or at least, complicit —helped in managing levels of defensive anger. Additionally, the use of a continuum enabled trainers to avoid reproducing the binary trap of innocence and guilt, and offered the prospect, at least, of openings or the beginning of uncomfortable conversations.

Pedagogically and ethically, Zembylas’s cultures of critical compassion [9] provide a helpful bridging point between discomfort and care to think anew about how to reintroduce value-based interventions that bridge the emotional and ethical into professional training on sensitive themes. Careful and informed facilitation skills are key here for those leading such sessions. For example, further ‘training the trainers’ in such a nuanced and responsive approach for the education and youth sector is an important next step. Yet, ten years post-austerity, post-COVID-19 and in the UK at least, post-Brexit, the financial and professional energy to engage with such a process may be lacking.

Such an approach goes beyond mandatory safeguarding training to thinking about how embedded historical, cultural and gendered values facilitate norms that silence and enable oppression. This is partly about developing responsive relationship and sex education curriculums, and beyond this it is about developing critical compassionate and responsive organisational cultures and supporting interprofessional dialogue about gendered norms and violence in all its forms. It is clear therefore that meaningful training on GRV for teachers, youth workers and other practitioners remains neglected in initial training. The need for ethically engaged and responsive professional development remains. We would argue that work on pedagogy of discomfort can provide useful tools in developing and engaging such work. We welcome further discomforting and critically-driven dialogue in these complex pedagogic and practice arenas.

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