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

Fin Cullen [1],* and Michael Whelan [2]

[1] Institute of Education, St Mary's University, Twickenham TW1 4SX, UK
[2] Department of Education & Childhood, University of the West of England, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK; michael.whelan@uwe.ac.uk
* Correspondence: fiona.cullen@stmarys.ac.uk

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.

Keywords: pedagogy of discomfort; gender; youth; heteronormativity; training; homophobia; gender-related violence

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1. Introduction

This reflective paper explores the emotions, ethics, and challenges of facilitating training on gender-related violence (GRV) with youth practitioners. We explore the complexities of facilitating and designing a specific training intervention for youth practitioners to recognise and tackle GRV. The training emerged from an EU-funded feminist project (UK GAP project) aimed at bringing together approaches to tackle violence against women and girls with challenging heteronormativity and homophobia.

This paper is concerned with the realm of emotions within training dynamics and the repercussions for ethically engaged pedagogy. We reflect on key learning from the UK GAP project with the aim of identifying tensions, opportunities and strategies in developing training to support critically engaged practice around sensitive topics such as GRV, to consider how discomfort presents and what responsibilities trainers and participants have towards one another within this process. This paper asks: How might social justice educators develop ethically responsive and discomforting training in tackling gender-related violence?

Theoretically, this paper draws on Boler's concept of the pedagogy of discomfort [1] in order to consider the emotional and ethical complexities of work on highly sensitive and troubling topics. Zembylas [2] draws attention to the ethical dilemmas implicit in bringing discomfort to education when exploring issues of social justice, which also provides an important theoretical orientation. This article begins by outlining the training context, before exploring how discomfort presented within the UK GAP training programme and the challenges this presented. Secondly, drawing on reflections from the training, we examine how Boler's and Zembylas's theoretical work can be operationalised to think productively about designing training for informal educators on sensitive issues with ethical integrity. Finally, we are keen to map out the potential implications of taking discomfort and care seriously when engaging in social justice education and training with informal educators towards one of 'critical hope' [3]. The account presented arises from interviews with trainers, focus group reflections and finally, a reflective account from one of the trainers and co-authors of this paper.

2. Setting the Context: The GAPWORK Project

Co-funded by the EU, the 24-month GAPWORK project ran in four different EU countries (UK, Ireland, Spain and Italy) between 2013 and 2015. Here, we particularly explore the experiences of trainers and practitioners on the UK arm of the programme. The GAP project attempted to link practical work influenced by identity politics and feminist anti-violence initiatives with theoretical work drawing on critical pedagogies, Queer and feminist post-structuralist theory. The GAP project sought to bridge gaps and understandings of gender and violence in relation to adults and child services and conceptions of domestic violence and homophobic violence and abuse [4,5]. 'The broad definition of gender-related violence problematised the violence of normativities, as well as material forms of violence, irrespective of who was targeted' [5] (p. 3).

Each national context autonomously designed and developed local training interventions to support youth practitioners in tackling GRV. Here, we present data that emerged from focus group discussions and trainer reflections on critical moments within the UK training, rather than a pan-project analysis. The use of pedagogy of discomfort as an analytical tool has only been drawn so far in the UK context. This paper seeks to unpack these critical micro moments in order to consider how hierarchies of power/knowledge and expertise were contested and reflected the complex sex-gender dynamics between trainers and participants within and outside the UK training programme. This paper primarily concentrates on Day One of the three-day programme titled 'Unpacking Gender-Related Violence', as it appeared to elicit the greatest level of discomfort of the three days in the trainers' and the participants' accounts (see Table 1).

Table 1. The UK training programme.

	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

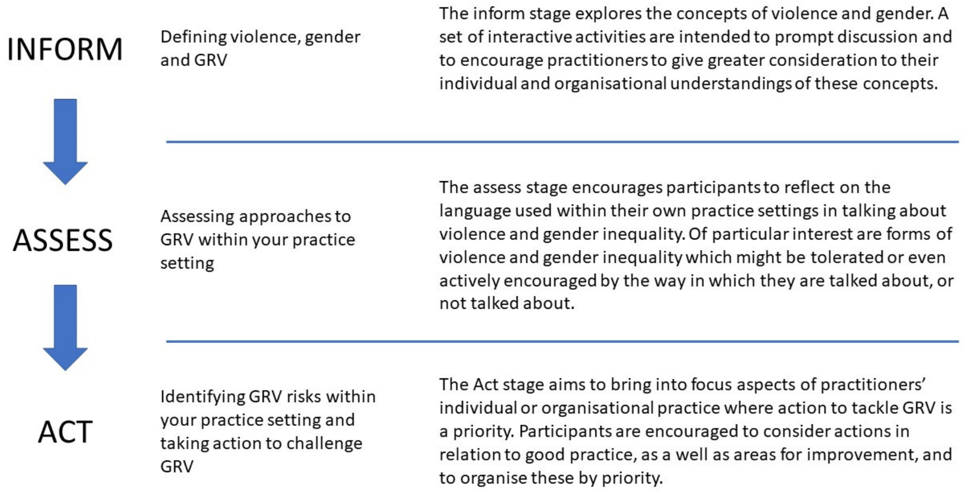
2.1. The Training Team

The UK training team incorporated a youth work organisation, a feminist law organisation and a University team. Trainers had expertise in feminist and anti-violence youth work, health education, diversity training and the law. Training was grounded in both gender studies and the law including the Equality Act [6], whilst also being flexible to engage with the organisational imperatives of the delivery settings. This brought together contrasting and, at times, competing perspectives. A simple characterisation of these competing perspectives is that, on the one hand, second wave feminist and post-structuralist and queer theoretical influences took a deconstructive approach which sought to challenge gender hierarchies and make less certain accepted individual and practice understandings, whilst on the other hand, the legal and (neo) managerial influences had a stronger orientation towards the pursuit of certainty in both content and training outcomes.

2.2. The Training Design and Participants

The UK project design was offered over two and half days for professionals working with young people. Over 128 participants completed the UK programme. Participants hailed from a range of diverse cultural and practice backgrounds and levels of experience, including trainees and experienced managers in a range of youth professions including primary and secondary teaching, youth work, fire service, sports coaches, social work and nurses. This meant a considerable time commitment from the employer and the staff. Although many youth practitioners elected to attend the training, others were mandated because their local authority employer had chosen to make this training compulsory. We reflect later how this mix of voluntary and compulsory participation shaped the experiences of individuals and groups within the training sessions.

Day One and the final half day were led by the youth work organisation and the youth work academics. Day Two was led by a feminist legal organisation and was primarily aimed at highlighting legal dimensions and remedies to issues such as child sexual exploitation and harassment. The first day offered an introduction to the concept of gender-related violence. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon the limits of normative sex-gender binaries, before exploring a range of gender-related violence case studies, before being introduced to the Inform to Act process (see Figure 1). Inform to Act is an assessment resource that was developed in the UK context in order to provide an auditing tool in identifying and taking action on gender-related violence. This included an exploration of the overlaps between inequalities and violence and the scope for such issues to be present within workplaces and organisations, and not just amongst the young people that the practitioners worked with and, as such, it linked the personal and professional to the institutional and societal.



INFORM	Defining violence, gender and GRV	The inform stage explores the concepts of violence and gender. A set of interactive activities are intended to prompt discussion and to encourage practitioners to give greater consideration to their individual and organisational understandings of these concepts.
ASSESS	Assessing approaches to GRV within your practice setting	The assess stage encourages participants to reflect on the language used within their own practice settings in talking about violence and gender inequality. Of particular interest are forms of violence and gender inequality which might be tolerated or even actively encouraged by the way in which they are talked about, or not talked about.
ACT	Identifying GRV risks within your practice setting and taking action to challenge GRV	The Act stage aims to bring into focus aspects of practitioners' individual or organisational practice where action to tackle GRV is a priority. Participants are encouraged to consider actions in relation to good practice, as a well as areas for improvement, and to organise these by priority.

Figure 1. Day One—Inform to Act process.

At the end of the final day, participants were invited to contribute to a group evaluation where they reflected on what they had gained from the experience and areas that might be strengthened. Participants completed pre- and post-questionnaires focusing on their work base, and training experience. For more on the full evaluation, see the GAPWORK reports which provide a summary of each context [5]. In addition, the research team observed the session and trainers were interviewed. This article is written by one of the co-ordinators of the training, Fin Cullen, and one of the trainers, Michael Whelan. Our personal experiences as researchers, youth practitioners and educators are entwined in our reflection and representation in this paper. The data presented here arise from the following sources: GAPWORK reports [5], post-training UK focus group with participants, individual interviews with the UK training team and personal reflections from the training team and authors.

Here, we focus on issues of challenge and tension, which most commonly emerged on Day One and were subsequently raised in the group discussion on the final day, or amongst focused discussion with the researcher. It is perhaps unsurprising that areas of potential discomfort might emerge on the opening day. Much recent training and continuous professional development in public sector organisations has moved to an online self-completion format or entails brief half-day information-led training on issues such as child sexual exploitation. GAPWORK UK adopted a multi-day training approach and included reflection on the personal, the professional, and the institutional, as well as information sharing which had the potential to feel 'discomforting' and potentially personally and professionally exposing. Online training, by contrast, is marked by its relative cost effectiveness, and especially for asynchronous self-completed content, typically results in a training experience which is more impersonal in nature and negates the emotional messiness of a broader 'educational' experience. Online training can seem less messy, safer and more boundaried than forms of face-to-face training which emphasise dialogue and critical reflection on practice as a training resource. Day One placed this form of critical reflection centerstage—by questioning the sex-gender binary and taken-for-granted assumptions about reassuring essentialist categories that might offer certainty and solace. For example, the sex-gender binary assumes that sex and gender are immutable dualistic categories. Day One's opening activity invited participants to reflect on the fluidity and cultural contingency of such categories in thinking through "What makes a man, a man? Or a woman, a woman?" This framed the subsequent training within this deconstructive sensibility which questions common sense assumptions about the fixity of binary sex, gender and sexuality. This approach, perhaps unsurprisingly, prompted participants to reflect on their personal and organisational value bases and elicited personal disclosures.

The two-and-a-half-day model provided the apparent luxury of diving deeper into the various overlapping strands of gender-related violence. However, it also meant that understaffed workplaces facing stark austerity cuts were left without staff for several days. The local authority partners sent many of their staff to the course as mandated training adding an additional layer of complexity to understanding and working with aspects of the discomfort experienced within the training. As one trainer noted:

> *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)

For some, especially those who had been mandated to attend, materials could seem obscure, irrelevant, and discomforting. Yet, without public sector organisations taking issues of equalities and social justice seriously, they are in breach of recent UK equalities legislation [6]. Moreover, if social justice training only 'preaches to the converted' then it risks remaining a marginal and marginalised issue of limited interest, and will little trouble existing workplace hierarchies that reproduce problematic and unjust workplace cultures; let alone begin to challenge such issues within client groups. Indeed, this was reflected in the legal trainer's account which noted that criminal justice workers expressed little interest in promoting positive relationship aspects of the training as they felt this was beyond the remit and loci of their practice.

> *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, it is evident that expectations, conceptions of practice, professionality and client group were entwined. Such framings also shaped expectations of what might be deemed as a legible and legitimate training experience—issues that we will return later in this paper. We turn firstly to the concept and ethics of discomfort and care and how this may manifest in education and training interventions that explore issues of social justice.

3. Introducing a Pedagogy of Discomfort

This paper draws upon Boler's conceptualisation of pedagogy of discomfort [1] to analyse the training process and experience. Boler's work has been fruitfully drawn on by scholars interrogating how critical pedagogy may cross over into the emotional realm when encountering and challenging injustice—especially in teacher education and beyond. Boler's work provides a powerful account of how the emotional—in the case of 'discomfort'—can motivate learners and disrupt hegemonic narratives that reproduce social injustice. Boler defines the concept of pedagogy of discomfort ' . . . as both an invitation to inquiry as well as a call to action' [1] (p. 176). The collective exploration enables new insights and forms new ways of being *and* doing. Such pedagogy does not prescribe action, but through collective witnessing invites dialogue and new ways of imagining practice (action). Even though Boler's work did not theoretically underpin the original design of this training programme, it helps in understanding and reflecting on the arising complexities and key learning. Indeed, Day One was clearly an invitation to inquiry before moving to action, as can be clearly seen in the movement and emphasis on Day One through to Day Three as noted in Table 1.

The aspects that are key to Boler's [1] conceptualisation are

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

We draw on these elements as we unpack areas of tension that arose during the delivery and production of the training.

Key here is the role of questioning and reflection within the realm of emotion, particularly when exploring contentious issues such as gender inequalities. As an important pedagogic tool, it can be used as a strategy to draw out tensions, and explore sometimes difficult feelings in order to gain collective personal and professional insights. Such practices demand a high degree of emotional labour for all participants. Boler notes that one of the most challenging arenas for such collective discomfort is that of racial and sexual oppression [1]. With this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that a 2.5 day training session on sexual and gender violence would provide a space of particular emotional challenge.

Such thorny ethical and pedagogical tensions have been explored by various scholars [1,7]. Prior work has theorised the arising dilemmas posed by social justice education and critical pedagogy and the nature of the relation between the pedagogue/participants. Previous scholarship exploring the area of teaching and critical pedagogy has attempted to theorise how the emotional and the ethical entwine within the classroom [1,2,7–9]. This paper departs from this scholarship as we are looking specifically at the training space; yet such prior work is also relevant and applicable to theorising work-based training. However, it is also recognised that education and training differ in regards to orientation, approach and expectations. The critical engagement with theory and the desire to cultivate spaces of critical dialogue, reflection and inquiry in the UK GAP training model shows a clear departure from narrow task and skill orientated training approaches which often predominate in the field.

Earlier scholarship has often examined the emotional and ethical dilemmas engendered within education for social justice within formal education settings. For example, the progressive classroom is not necessarily one of safety [10]. As Morley—writing in a university woman studies context—argues, discussions of sex/gender oppression can create unsafe tense spaces and necessitate increased emotional labour from feminist pedagogues who are required to manage the micropolitics of the classroom experience. Yet, the challenge here is the move to bring feminist and critical pedagogies into a workplace training model—where the ongoing support, emotional labour and careful nuanced reflection and 'collective witnessing' [1] on areas of challenge and contestation are squeezed into a 2.5 day programme.

Some participants were mandated by their employer to attend training workshops during company time and again, the ‘expert’ facilitator/trainer establishes the parameters of the agenda and leads the participants in acquiring the set learning objectives and potentially assesses their competency. Such simplistic conceptualisations of content and process of work exploring issues of social justice fails to engage with the myriad complexities and subjectivities that are brought into being within, through and outside training space. Moreover, the very nature of this training/education on gender/sexualities equalities and gender-related violence is rightly discomforting and yet, participants may be reluctant in both engaging with the content and process of training; particularly if they have been compelled to attend.

The emotional realm and feeling of discomfort and ambiguity framed discussion of challenging issues such as gender-related violence. Participants were asked to reflect on their own assumptions and investments. For example, by being prompted to critically reflect on the presence of violence and gender inequality in their own actions and relations, in addition to considering their organisational cultures. This challenged learners to consider how their professional role and their own values might be complicit in reproducing problematic norms and sustaining inequalities. Secondly, the *call to action* dimension emphasised operationalising what learners might do next in regards policy and practice areas in their workplace.

Via discomforting pedagogies, learners confront social norms. Yet, at the same time, while pedagogies can have transformative and radical potential, without due care, it also risks reinforcing and solidifying existing identities, rather than shifting the debate in challenging injustice. For example, one challenge here is training participants’ own embodied and positioned subjectivities. Areas of potential tension include participants’ own experiences as sex-gendered subjects, but also as employees in highly hierarchical structures and neoliberal policy regimes, can often feel intensely disempowering. Everyone is invested in the topic at hand; yet not all might feel that they can be an agentic subject within such hierarchical organisational and institutional systems. As a result, such felt powerlessness can result in learners dwelling on discomfort, and thus risks apathy, antagonism or disengagement, rather than a clear ‘call to action’ emerging from the training intervention.

Zembylas’ work speaks to the themes explored in Boler’s work in theorising and conceptualising aspects of the emotional, the ethical and critical pedagogy. Reflecting on Boler’s pedagogy of discomfort, Zembylas and McGlynn [8] explore the limits and possibilities of (dis)comfort and note potential issues of safety and risk for learners and teachers alike [8]. Indeed, pertinent ethical questions concern the appropriateness of such contextual pedagogies; especially as they may have differential impact on learners. Rather than abandoning such discomforting pedagogies, Zembylas questions how we provide spaces of control and support within such learning contexts in an argument for critical pedagogies of compassion [2,9]. This argument is framed around how educators engage with challenging issues of suffering that move beyond those of simple sentimentalising or moralistic framings [9] (p. 507). Indeed, such simplistic framings can reinforce reductive narratives where learners refute, reject, contest or block engagement with such issues. For Zembylas, this manifests itself in a range of phenomenon that can arise in the classroom for learners confronted with challenging issues exploring social injustice, from students experiencing compassion fatigue, becoming indifferent, expressing emotional resistance and/or creating narratives of self-victimisation. Due care to the conditions of learning in addition to training content is thus vital to move learners beyond simplistic binaries of them and us, through an engagement with a critical compassion that provides scope for learners to grasp asymmetries of suffering [9] (p. 507).

Such issues are central to the GAP training’s commitment in exploring the banality and ubiquity of gendered everyday violence as institutionalised through heteropatriarchy not just in the lives of children and young people, but also in the lives of the training participants, their families, colleagues and the institutions and structures inhabited by both young people and practitioners. Such a pedagogic move is one of potential risk and danger. While only Day One particularly focused on deconstructing and questioning sex-gender norms, issues around homophobia and themes of gendered violence ran throughout and provided a destabilising presence that presented considerable challenges and unease. The next section explores some of the emerging tensions that arose during the training sessions and the importance of such critical moments in considering what constitutes a 'successful' training programme.

4. An Invitation to Inquiry

While the focus was that of combating gender-related violence, it was clear that practitioners also work within organisations which reproduce broader discourses of systematic and institutional oppression. Much scholarly work has explored the challenges of workplace bullying and harassment [11–13]. Post-austerity public services in England have seen savage cuts to jobs, training and support for youth practitioners and increasingly precarious and understaffed working conditions [14–16]. Moreover, a growing literature has explored the complexities of practitioners negotiating heteronormativity in the workplace [17–19]. Such work notes the engrained heterosexist organisational cultures and management regimes that silences and marginalises such practitioners' experiences. Even the most apparent progressive workplace can be framed within repressive organisation cultures that invisibilises, marginalises and silences worker and service user experiences of oppression.

On Day One, facilitators moved to draw on case studies and institution-based activities, yet the first morning brought the personal and the professional together in reflecting on understanding of key issues and capacity to act. The personal is *both* political and powerful. Experiential learning motivates this spirit of inquiry and early training activities invited participants to confront and reflect on their own assumptions. On reflection, it is clear that participants were thus encouraged to 'dwell in discomfort' [1] and ambiguity through critical reflection in order to gain new insights which could be then drawn on in the subsequent days' workshops, where legal implications of GRV and action planning were the main foci.

Boler [1] notes this as through engaging with complex issues we learn to live with our ambiguous selves. Exposing or dwelling on these complexities can potentially erode long-invested personal/professional identities. Indeed, personal disclosures during the training of professionals' experiencing first-hand gender-related violence in their personal life began to dismantle barriers. However, such disclosures also potentially risked exposing and destabilising carefully crafted personal and professional personas.

Participants working with young people to tackle gender-related violence might also face a variety of forms of direct and indirect violence themselves, from structural and institutional forms of oppression to cases of inter and intrapersonal violence from colleagues and clients. Such violence might take a range of forms from microaggressions to ongoing bullying or heterosexist norms that silence and marginalise. Participants thus already inhabit complex—and sometimes contradictory and ambiguous—positions as expert/learner, as rescuer/victim, as persecuted/persecuting with entwined personal and professional identities and subjectivities potentially remade and recast, reformed and questioned.

Twin themes of voice and silence shaped these dynamics. While the training activities provided a valued site of reflection and testimony for some, this was not the case for all. This usual silencing of experiences/identities within the office made the temporary space of the training room a particularly tricky professional site where such discussions and identities were made legible and rendered visible. Diversity programmes can create a space of backlash where participants wish to marginalise or suggest that such issues are relics of the past [1,2,7]. Yet, others might feel this ongoing erasure further marginalises and silences their personal identity. In this way, the training room, rather than becoming a safe space to investigate the needs of the 'other', became a site of ongoing tension and negotiation about personal and professional identities and sites and systems of oppression. In focus group accounts, it was clear that certain topics and issues around oppression were seen as too 'hot' for the office and staff expressed caution about raising issues for fear of personal and professional consequences. For example, during focus group discussions, LGBTQ staff present noted the challenges of dealing with workplace homophobia. As one woman noted:

> . . . *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, issues of gender, sexuality and race in/equality take on different characteristics and levels of importance and recognition in the workplace as noted in the Equality Act (2010) [6]. This meant, for example, that out gay members of staff felt burdened with raising issues around workplace homophobia. Participant accounts suggested concern about drawing attention to homophobic and heterosexist workplace culture for fear of being perceived as hectoring and facing further stigmatisation. Moreover, 'being a gay person' meant that the agenda was particularly charged as it often appeared that heterosexual staff felt less active in challenging or even recognising homophobic and heterosexism present in the workplace. The key arising question here is who owns the problem and how is it mobilised?

The training experience could be a tricky space—particularly if one was being trained alongside workmates. Indeed, workplace dynamics could spill back into the training room and vice versa, as was highlighted by another participant:

> *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*)

These comments arose partly from the Inform to Act process (see Figure 1) that involved participants reflecting on their own workplaces and how gender-related violence could be normalised as part of everyday work cultures. There was clear recognition amongst participants that such issues around sex-gender oppression were apparent in office place dynamics—yet how individuals were positioned and policed within wider work-based hierarchies might prevent disclosure and challenge. Indeed, another participant presented negotiating such issues in the workplace as having much in common with playing a 'game of chess' in knowing how and when to react and challenge colleagues and oppressive workplace cultures.

5. Anger Is an Energy

Emotional labour lies at the heart of exploring issues of social justice and difference. As Williams [20] notes in his concept of 'structures of feelings', dominant social relations means that the hegemonic norms are internalised within the emotional realm [21]. Through collective witnessing, learners are encouraged to move beyond the 'inscribed emotional and cultural terrains' of those comfort zones to think differently [21] (p. 107).

Critical inquiry often means exploring difficult emotional terrain and difficult emotions. Multiple forms of anger can manifest within such sessions. Whilst not selling prescriptive dogmatic solutions, the very ambiguity of considering new ways of being can engender anger. This might emerge from an unsettling and 'moral anger' at social injustice—or a 'defensive' anger—as fragile identities and investments come under scrutiny [1]. Indeed, permutations of these different aspects of anger may be in play in the same educational space and sometimes within the same person—whether learner or trainer.

Unsurprisingly, such dynamics played out on occasion in the training room. This might appear by resistance, reluctance, sabotage and/or disengagement, and is also potentially linked here to whether individuals had attended training from their own volition or because they were mandated by managers. For example, trainers on the team noted that discussions of violence and patriarchy created feelings of collective discomfort and 'violent' reactions from particularly male participants.

> *<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)

Such discomfort and anger cascade in multiple directions between training participants and towards trainers. This is not unexpected when exploring such emotive and sensitive issues, but it had clear implications for training design and intent. Trainers reflected upon the complexity of negotiation between individual and institutional need and expectations. For example, two trainers noted moments of tension that had arisen where male participants voiced antagonism to some of the ideas presented by female trainers and/or participants. Several trainers noted a gender dynamic in play in the training space where older men questioned accounts by younger women trainers.

> *...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)

This discomfort reflects contemporary discourses shaped by post-feminist critiques that diminish, negate, or refute the continuing existing corrosive heterosexism and patriarchy [22,23]. By interrupting, changing the topic, working off topic or engaging in monologues about the natural 'fact' of gender inequality, such tactics further silenced and oppressed other less combative members of the group. Such gendered aspects also meant that gender identities came into play. For example, one male trainer felt it necessary to intervene and demonstrate his role as a political ally with the female trainer mid-session on Day Two, noting that he would be heard and taken more seriously by the resistant male members of the groups. This action created further complication as he reflected that it momentarily reproduced normative and problematic gender roles within the team

Discomforting topics create moments of challenge and complexity that question individuals' sense of self or world order, and may create negative feeling of discomfort or tension. The issue faced here is how to maintain the balance between empowerment and discomfort in a caring and compassionate way. As the launching point, for the training was to unpack (hetero)normative assumptions and values, participants felt their own investments and identities were under attack. Here, the emphasis is on the training team engaging with the ethical and pedagogical complexity at the design stage. For example, the trainer-coordinator on Day Three considered the ethical dimensions of asking participants to explore their own identities and reflected upon the arising resistance when identities were questioned:

> *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.

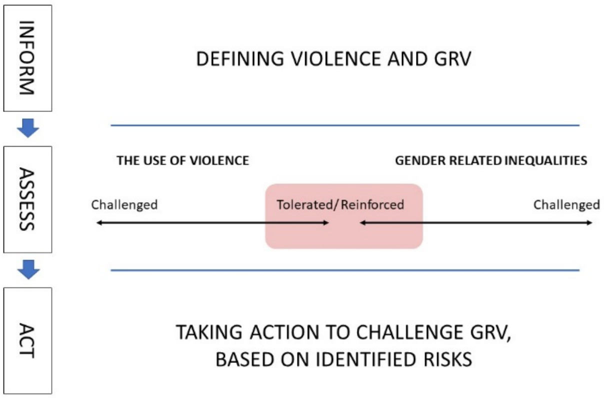

INFORM
DEFINING VIOLENCE AND GRV
ASSESS
THE USE OF VIOLENCE
GENDER RELATED INEQUALITIES
Challenged
Tolerated/Reinforced
Challenged
ACT
TAKING ACTION TO CHALLENGE GRV,
BASED ON IDENTIFIED RISKS

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 neoliberal, 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 curricula, 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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