

Article

Developing Critical Posthumanist Pedagogic Praxis for Youth and Community Work

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Abstract

Youth and community work in the United Kingdom has an important role in responding to social challenges in young people's lives such as gender-related violence (GRV). Youth and community work's rich inheritance from critical pedagogy has inspired it to centre the relationship between youth and community worker and young person, and the principles of voluntary association and being youth-led. However, as feminists have reconceptualised models of violence, we may need to rethink how youth and community work praxis is conceived, especially given the sociomaterial turn. Youth and community work practice and the education of its practitioners often remain rooted in humanist, individualised, and competency-based models that fail to prepare practitioners for contemporary challenges. Drawing on a doctoral study of youth and community work responses to GRV, this article argues that both youth and community work praxis and the education of future practitioners require norm-critical, feminist, queer, and posthumanist pedagogies. It maps a proposed pedagogic framework for a broad youth and community work praxis that cultivates critical pedagogies with sociomaterial attunement, an ethics of care, critical reflexivity, and the capacity to work with discomfort and uncertainty. This critical posthumanist praxis offers future youth and community work practitioners the tools to navigate the complexities of social issues such as GRV and to enact transformative youth and community work.

Keywords: youth and community work; violence; new materialism; posthumanism; sociomateriality; norm-critical pedagogy; feminist pedagogy; queer pedagogy; critical participatory action research; assemblage theory



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1. Introduction

Youth and community work in the United Kingdom has a long tradition of tackling inequality and oppression through relational, informal, and social justice-oriented education (Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Belton, 2009; Cooper et al., 2015; Seal & Frost, 2014; Batsleer, 2021). However, the conditions of practice have shifted dramatically. Austerity, the erosion of open-access youth and community work provision, the rise of managerial audit cultures, and the intensification of social inequalities have reshaped the terrain of practice (Davies, 2018; de St Croix, 2018; Batsleer, 2021). Within this shifting landscape, youth and community workers increasingly encounter destructive social phenomena in young people's lives, such as gender-related violence (GRV) (Alldred et al., 2014; Cooper-Levitan & Alldred, 2022). Such forms of violence can be woven into everyday occurrences in youth settings (Cooper-Levitan, 2025).

Consequently, youth and community work praxis must evolve beyond humanism (Gorman et al., 2024) if it is to challenge the neoliberal and functionalist hegemonies operating within youth and community work and wider society, which shape phenomena such as GRV. Practitioner education also needs to keep pace with the sociomaterial complexity of contemporary social relations. Building on Pisani's (2023) account of critical posthumanist youth and community work and Gorman et al.'s (2024) account of critical posthumanist praxis for climate justice, this article focuses on the pedagogic approaches youth and community work needs to disrupt gender-related violence as a sociomaterial phenomenon.

Drawing on findings from a Critical Participatory Action Research Project (CPAR) and a feminist new materialist cartographic analysis, the article shows how GRV operates as a sociomaterial assemblage and how practitioners respond through critical, feminist, queer, and posthumanist pedagogic approaches. It then considers the implications of these practice-based insights for the professional formation of future youth and community work practitioners, particularly in relation to cultivating sociomaterial attunement, critical reflexivity, and the capacity to work with discomfort and uncertainty.

This article draws directly on a doctoral study of youth and community work responses to gender-related violence. That study demonstrated that GRV is not simply an interpersonal problem but is produced as a complex sociomaterial assemblage: a dynamic constellation of bodies, discourses, spaces, and non-human objects that territorialise young people, youth and community workers, and youth and community work settings (Fox & Alldred, 2022b). The study argued that youth and community work is itself a sociomaterial practice that can plug into assemblages of GRV and affect the capacities available to young people, practitioners, and settings through the deployment of norm-critical, feminist, queer, and posthumanist pedagogies. These pedagogies can open possibilities for resistance and transformation through processes of deterritorialisation. However, they require practitioners who are attuned to sociomaterial relations, comfortable with discomfort, able to work with uncertainty (Keddie, 2021; Cullen et al., 2025; Cullen & Whelan, 2021), and committed to an ethics of care (Batsleer, 2015). This article therefore argues that youth and community work and youth and community work education must cultivate these capacities through both critical and posthumanist pedagogic approaches. It must move beyond humanist, individualised, and behaviourist models of pedagogy and instead recognise the sociomaterial nature of social reality, including youth and community work itself (Pisani, 2023). Central to this is recognising the vitality of non-human materiality within the relational praxis of youth and community work (Gorman et al., 2024).

The doctoral research was conducted in England, but the arguments developed here may resonate more widely and offer a starting point for exploring how the sociomaterial turn can inform work with young people in a range of contexts. Moreover, the sociomaterial dynamics of gender-related violence and the pedagogic responses explored in this article speak to international debates in youth and community work and education, where practitioners navigate inequality, normativity, and various forms of violence and harm.

To guide this analysis, the article addresses the following research questions: what pedagogic capacities do youth and community work practitioners need to disrupt gender-related violence when it is understood as a sociomaterial phenomenon, and how are these capacities developed through critical, feminist, queer, and posthumanist youth and community work praxis? The next section establishes the conceptual framework used to answer these questions by clarifying how critical youth and community work praxis, assemblage, territorialisation and deterritorialisation, affect economies, and sociomaterial attunement connect the study's methodology to the analysis that follows.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1. Critical Youth and Community Work Praxis and Gender-Related Violence

Violence is a profound pedagogic concern for youth and community workers (Seal & Harris, 2016; Cooper-Levitan & Alldred, 2022) and has clear implications for youth and community work education. Youth and community workers are often among the first adults to whom young people disclose harm, seek support, or test out new ways of being (Cooper-Levitan, 2025). Critical and radical youth and community work scholars, alongside feminist youth and community work theorists, have shown how Freirean-inspired praxis can respond to issues such as climate change (Gorman et al., 2024), youth violence (Seal & Harris, 2016) and sexism (Batsleer, 2015). More broadly, critically informed youth and community work has a vital role in challenging oppression, structural violence, and inequality (Jeffs & Smith, 1990, 2005; Belton, 2009; Cooper et al., 2015; Batsleer, 2021), placing youth and community work at the frontline of both the reproduction and the disruption of gendered power relations (Batsleer, 2018).

Gender-related violence (GRV) is therefore not a marginal issue in youth and community work; it is a pervasive, structuring force that shapes young people's everyday lives, relationships, and opportunities for flourishing and can even be seen to be woven through youth and community work settings and practices (Cooper-Levitan, 2025, p. 168). To understand why disrupting GRV must be central to youth and community work pedagogy, it is necessary to situate it within the broader literature on gendered violence, youth cultures, and informal education.

GRV can be defined as:

“Violence that relates to gender but is not only structured by the primary axis of gender inequality and might include violence (actual, threatened or symbolic) that is enabled by the very concept of gender and so recognises gender normativity, the insistence of the gender binary, homophobia, transphobia as well as injuries of women's inequality to men-sexism, misogyny, sexual violence and sexual harassment or coercion” (Alldred et al., 2014, p. 15).

This definition of GRV adopts a comprehensive conceptualisation of violence (Bufacchi, 2005) and draws on second- and third-wave feminism alongside pro-feminism (Alldred, 2023). GRV here is not limited to extreme or criminalised forms of violence but includes a continuum of behaviours, practices, and discourses that regulate gendered identities and reinforce inequalities (Kelly, 1988; Alldred, 2023). Importantly, this definition is expansive and includes violence directed towards men and boys that is rooted in gender normativity, heteronormativity, or cisnormativity. In this sense, it can be viewed as any “sexist, sexualising, homophobic, transphobic language and behaviour” (Alldred, 2023, p. 479), directed towards anyone. We began working with this definition in 2013 because it recognised intersectional injustices.

Youth and community work has long been recognised as a site of critical, informal, and non-formal education, where young people learn about themselves, others, and the world (Bamber & Murphy, 1999; Jeffs & Smith, 1990, 2005; Batsleer, 2015). This includes learning how to navigate issues such as violence (Seal & Harris, 2016). Across international scholarship, there is growing recognition that practitioners must be equipped to challenge structural inequalities, harmful norms, and everyday violences in ways that extend beyond competency-based or behaviourist models of practice (Ginwright & James, 2002; Andreotti, 2021; Keddie, 2021).

Ginwright and James' (2002) work on social justice and youth development highlights how young people and practitioners co-create critical, relational, and collective responses to injustice, offering a powerful alternative to narrow skills-based frameworks. Andreotti's

(2021) call to ‘hospice modernity’ foregrounds the need to unsettle dominant humanist assumptions and attend to the deeper epistemic conditions that shape practice. This resonates with the sociomaterial orientation of this study. Keddie’s (2021) scholarship on pedagogies of discomfort emphasises the importance of engaging with tension and uncertainty in the process of learning. Research from Northern Ireland (Harland & Morgan, 2006; Morgan & McArdle, 2018) further demonstrates how gender-conscious youth and community work can challenge entrenched norms and violences in contexts marked by conflict and division, a position that is also taken up by international scholars that explore GRV in young people’s lives (Barrio & Biglia, 2025). Together, these bodies of work show that the challenges addressed in this article are shared internationally, and that practitioners across diverse settings grapple with similar sociomaterial dynamics of inequality and violence. This literature establishes the need for a pedagogic framework that is both critically informed and sociomaterially attuned.

Over the last two decades, scholars have documented the persistence of different forms of GRV in young people’s lives (Barter, 2009; Sundaram, 2013; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015), and Jackson et al. (2022) identify how racialisation compounds the sexual harassment experienced by Black and minoritised girls and young women. Tackling homophobic bullying and everyday sexism in youth and community work settings is vital for promoting the wellbeing of all young people in the care of youth and community workers. Seal and Harris (2016) demonstrate that youth and community work, understood as an ethical, relational, and critically reflexive praxis, has a role to play in responding to youth violence in its broadest sense. This response is multi-layered, occurring at structural, personal, and existential levels (Seal & Harris, 2016). Moreover, youth and community work teaches young people what behaviour is acceptable, who holds power, whose bodies matter, and how gendered norms are enforced (Batsleer, 2018). Feminist youth and community workers have long valued difference and an ethic of care (Batsleer, 2018), and if youth and community work does not actively disrupt GRV, it risks reproducing it (Cooper-Levitan, 2025).

2.2. Critical Posthumanist Pedagogy, GRV and Youth and Community Work

The limitation of the approaches described above is that they remain grounded in ontological humanism. Sociomaterialism understands social life as emerging through the entanglement of humans, non-humans, discourses, bodies, spaces, objects, and social conditions, disrupting any fixed boundary between the social and the material. It draws on Barad’s (2003) account of agential realism, in which social reality is produced not through discourse alone but through sociomaterial intra-actions, and on Braidotti’s (2019) critical posthumanist rejection of human exceptionalism. This gives non-human materiality equal significance in the production of social reality. From this sociomaterial position, Fox and Alldred (2022b), Alldred (2023), and Cooper-Levitan (2025, p. 168) conceptualise GRV as a sociomaterial assemblage: a phenomenon produced through the coming together of gender norms, bodies, spaces, objects, affects, and institutional conditions. If GRV is produced in this way, then youth and community work pedagogy must prepare practitioners to notice how spaces, objects, and relationships shape interactions; to recognise the agency of non-human materials; to work with creative, embodied, and material practices; and to challenge normative gendered scripts.

Critical posthumanist pedagogy challenges the humanist assumption that agency resides solely in human actors. It encourages practitioners to recognise the distributed nature of agency and the co-production of practice through human and non-human relations (Murriss, 2020; Pisani, 2023). Some youth and community work scholars have started to apply this approach to ethical youth and community work practices. For example, Gorman et al. (2024) argue for a decolonial and posthumanist orientation in responding to the

climate crisis. Scholarship in education has also shown how posthumanist pedagogies can address themes associated with GRV through creative and sociomaterial methods (Mendes et al., 2019; Ringrose et al., 2020b; Renold & Timperley, 2023). This paper builds on emerging literature on sociomaterial praxis to explore how such pedagogic approaches might be used in youth and community work settings to disrupt GRV assemblages. There has been limited reflection on how education and training for youth and community workers can identify and respond to GRV (Cooper-Levitan & Alldred, 2022). One of the aims of the study was therefore to investigate how norm-critical, feminist, and queer pedagogies could align with posthumanism to develop youth and community work practice capable of disrupting the normativity underpinning GRV. This, in turn, has implications for the education and training of youth and community workers. The empirical data discussed below demonstrate how the sociomaterial turn can be applied to youth and community work praxis, including both direct work with young people and youth and community worker education.

2.3. *Assemblage*

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and developed by DeLanda (2006), assemblage refers to a constellation of heterogeneous elements—bodies, discourses, objects, spaces, technologies, and resources—that come together temporarily to produce a social phenomenon. As Feely (2020, p. 6) explains, the unity of an assemblage comes from the fact that its components work together to produce something. In this article, GRV is conceptualised as an assemblage, meaning that it is not reducible to individual attitudes or interpersonal behaviours but emerges through the entanglement of human and non-human forces. This concept provides the unit of analysis for the findings by making it possible to trace how bodies, spaces, objects, discourses, and social conditions combine to produce or disrupt gender-related violence.

2.4. *Territorialisation and Deterritorialisation*

Assemblages are dynamic. They stabilise through territorialisation, a process that maintains order within the assemblage (Feely, 2020). Conversely, deterritorialisation refers to disruptions that unsettle the assemblage and produce transformation (Feely, 2020; Fox & Alldred, 2016). In this study, territorialisation describes how GRV becomes normalised in youth and community work settings, while deterritorialisation captures moments in which youth and community work practice interrupts those normalisations and opens different possibilities for relation, learning, and care.

2.5. *Affect Economies*

Affect economies refer to the patterned flows of sociomaterial relations that stabilise or disrupt an assemblage. The focus here is on how processes of territorialisation, reterritorialisation, and deterritorialisation generate affects that shape what becomes possible in youth and community work settings. For example, an affect economy may describe how social practices, physical space, everyday objects, and educational resources can either intensify gender-related violence or help to disrupt it.

2.6. *Sociomaterial Atonement and Agency*

Sociomaterial attunement (Ringrose et al., 2020a) refers to practitioners' capacity to notice how physical spaces, social practices, bodies, emotions, and non-human resources form assemblages. It involves analysing relations between people, materials, and environments, and recognising non-human agency: a position that moves beyond humanist accounts of agency to acknowledge the liveliness of materiality. A name tag, a building, an educational resource, a pool table, or a banner can, for example, all participate in enabling

GRV or disrupting it. Sociomaterial attunement is therefore necessary for understanding complex practice dynamics and working intentionally to affect social change.

2.7. Operationalising the Conceptual Framework

These concepts guide the analysis in the following ways:

- (a) Assemblage provides the unit of analysis, enabling the mapping of how GRV emerges through sociomaterial relations rather than only individual behaviour.
- (b) Territorialisation and deterritorialisation offer a lens for identifying how GRV becomes stabilised and how practitioners disrupt these stabilisations.
- (c) Affect economies trace the sociomaterial flows within GRV–youth and community work assemblages and show how these flows shape what practitioners and young people can do.
- (d) Sociomaterial attunement and agency foreground how non-human elements participate in practice and how practitioners can analyse sociomaterial flows to understand how assemblages are produced and transformed.

3. Methodology and Methods: Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) and Feminist New Materialist Cartography

Critical sociomaterialism provided a suitable methodological foundation for the study because it enabled an examination of how the social and material components of gender-related violence (GRV) shape youth and community work practice, and how the sociomaterial elements of youth and community work could, in turn, disrupt GRV. This approach aligns with traditions such as Kemmis' practice theory (Kemmis, 2019) and Feminist New Materialism (Fox & Alldred, 2016), which share a commitment to understanding how everyday practices are produced through entanglements of discourse, bodies, materials, and power. By focusing on the micro-practices through which GRV and youth and community work unfold, critical sociomaterialism supports an inquiry into both how harm becomes embedded in routine interactions and how practitioners can intervene to create conditions for social transformation.

The study adopted a methodological design that brought together Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) and feminist new materialist cartography. CPAR was chosen because of its alignment with the ethos of youth and community work as relational, dialogic, and grounded in democratic participation (Seal & Harris, 2016). CPAR mirrors these principles by positioning practitioners not as subjects of research but as co-researchers who actively shape the enquiry (Kemmis et al., 2014). It emphasises collective reflection, iterative cycles of action and analysis, and a commitment to social transformation (Kemmis et al., 2014). These principles were essential for a study concerned with the pedagogic process of disrupting GRV, which is itself a deeply relational and political endeavour (Alldred, 2023).

The CPAR process unfolded across three interconnected phases in four youth and community work settings. Two settings (pseudonymised here) were based in London: 'Pride LGBTQ+ Youth Club', a youth group serving LGBTQ+ young people across greater London, and 'Aspire CIC', a local community-run project based in south London. The third setting was based in the Midlands region of the UK: the 'EastShire' project, managed through a partnership between a county fire service and a large national youth charity. Finally, 'Tikkun', a Jewish youth movement, participated in the project. The organisations were recruited through university-based youth and community work research networks and related professional networks, with three having participated directly in a prior practitioner-training project on gender-related violence (Alldred et al., 2014), from which the doctoral study grew.

The first phase of the CPAR focused on reconnaissance (Kemmis et al., 2014), in which participating youth and community workers identified how GRV manifested in the everyday lives of young people and practitioners. This involved forming four critical reflection teams, gathering evidence through interviews, observations, and reports of critical incidents, and collaboratively analysing the initial findings. These early conversations revealed the ways that GRV circulated within youth and community work settings through banter, spatial arrangements, and the affective tone of sessions.

The second phase centred on implementing practice changes to address GRV in each setting. Across the project, the dataset included five critical reflection workshops focused on critical incidents of practice (Fook & Gardner, 2007), 29 unstructured and semi-structured interviews, 13 participant observations, and 14 documentary artefacts such as session plans. Twenty-seven participants took part across the four phases, although participation fluctuated because CPAR is grounded in the principle of voluntary participation (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Examples of youth and community work activities included the development of workshops, creative interventions, and youth-led initiatives, all designed to disrupt GRV. Practitioners experimented with new approaches, from norm-critical conversations to creative 'Gender Robots' workshops, reconfiguring spaces to introduce new artefacts that troubled gender norms. These interventions were not imposed by the researcher; they emerged from the collaborative analysis of the reconnaissance phase and were shaped by the practitioners' intimate knowledge of their settings.

The third phase focused on sustaining learning from these activities. Practitioners reflected what had shifted, what had resisted change, and what new possibilities had emerged. This phase highlighted the nonlinear nature of GRV work: moments of transformation were often small, fleeting, or subtle, yet they carried significant pedagogic weight.

The analysis was undertaken in two stages. The first stage used template analysis (King, 2012), which was well suited to the diverse data types generated through CPAR. This abductive approach allowed the use of a priori themes based on Kemmis et al.'s (2014) elements of practice while also enabling new themes to emerge. Practitioners participated in this first stage through data familiarisation and coding, supporting a collaborative reading of how GRV appeared in everyday youth and community work practice.

The second stage developed this initial template analysis through a sociomaterial analysis of the data. This was necessary because Kemmis' framework retains a residual humanism that can limit recognition of non-human vitality (Frid, 2021). Centring agential realism and drawing from Feminist New Materialism, the second stage examined the affect economies and intra-actions (Barad, 2003) within the assemblages. Following Feely (2020), it mapped how sociomaterial components—human and non-human—came together to produce territorialisation, deterritorialisation, and reterritorialisation (Fox & Alldred, 2022a). This second stage was completed by the researcher alone due to pandemic-related disruptions. Together, the two stages enabled a detailed cartography of GRV–youth and community work assemblages and illuminated the complex sociomaterial dynamics shaping youth and community work practice.

Traditional qualitative methods often focus on discourse, cognition, or individual behaviour. However, as the study demonstrated, GRV is not solely discursive or behavioural; it is sociomaterial. Capturing this complexity required a methodological approach capable of attending to these entanglements. Feminist new materialist cartography, drawing on the work of Fox and Alldred (2022a), Feely (2020), Barad (2003), Braidotti (2019), and Deleuze and Guattari (1987), provided such an approach. Cartography treats data not as representations of an underlying reality but as traces of assemblages: dynamic constellations of human and non-human forces that come together to produce affects (Fox

& Alldred, 2022a). It therefore enables the researcher to map relations, intensities, affect economies, and material-discursive forces rather than treating data as evidence of individual attitudes alone.

In this study, cartography formed the second stage of analysis after the initial template analysis. The cartographic process involved mapping GRV–youth and community work assemblages and examining how GRV assemblages plugged into and intra-acted with youth and community work assemblages. This involved reading the data for sociomaterial components: who and what was present, what forces were at work, which objects or spaces mattered, and how affects circulated. These components were then mapped in relation to one another, tracing flows of influence, tension, and possibility. The analysis focused on processes of territorialisation, through which GRV assemblages stabilised harmful patterns, and on deterritorialisation or reterritorialisation, through which these patterns were disrupted or reconfigured, opening space for new ways of being. This methodological approach was particularly useful for capturing the micropolitical dynamics of youth and community work practice. The doctoral research ultimately produced a cartography of seven GRV–youth and community work assemblages.

CPAR and cartography also worked together to foreground the role of practitioners as both subjects and agents of change. Through critical reflection teams, practitioners engaged in ongoing dialogue about their own positionalities, assumptions, and emotional responses. This reflexive process was essential for developing the ethical and relational capacities required to disrupt GRV. At the same time, the cartographic analysis revealed how practitioners themselves were shaped by the sociomaterial assemblages in which they worked, for example, how organisational policies, spatial constraints, and material resources influenced their ability to intervene.

Ethics and validity were central to the methodological approach. Ethical approval was granted in two stages by the relevant university ethics committee. CPAR emphasises ethical relationships, transparency, and shared ownership of the research process (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018). In this study, ethical considerations included ensuring that practitioners and young people were not exposed to harm, navigating the emotional labour of discussing GRV, and maintaining confidentiality within small organisations. Validity was approached not as objective truth but as praxis validity: meaning the extent to which the research contributed to ethical change in practice (Kemmis et al., 2014). The iterative cycles of action and reflection ensured that the findings were grounded in the lived realities of practitioners and young people.

Methodological Limitations

Feminist New Materialism and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) both offer rich, relational, and political approaches to enquiry, yet they also carry limitations. Feminist New Materialism is sometimes criticised for being abstract and difficult to translate into practical research processes, and it requires careful attention to ensure that structural inequalities do not become obscured within accounts of material-discursive complexity. CPAR is time-consuming, and it is difficult to achieve full participation, especially within doctoral research and in practice settings shaped by workload pressures, organisational change, and, in this study, the later disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings therefore cannot be treated as generalisable in a conventional sense. Their transferability lies instead in the conceptual and pedagogic insights they offer: they show how practitioners in particular English youth and community work settings identified, mapped, and disrupted GRV assemblages, and they provide a framework that can be tested, adapted, or challenged in other professional, organisational, and national contexts.

4. Findings

4.1. Pedagogic Capacities for Disrupting GRV

Through the CPAR process and the feminist new materialist cartographic analysis, the study identified two interrelated pedagogic capacities that enabled practitioners to disrupt gender-related violence (GRV) as a sociomaterial phenomenon. First, practitioners drew on norm-critical, feminist, and queer pedagogies to interrupt the territorialisation of harmful gender norms. Second, they developed sociomaterial attunement to the role of spaces, objects, and material arrangements in both reproducing and disrupting GRV. The analysis below makes these capacities explicit by showing how particular empirical moments can be read through assemblage, affect, territorialisation/deterritorialisation, and sociomaterial agency.

4.1.1. Critical Praxis for Disrupting GRV

All the assemblages contained elements of norm-critical, feminist, and queer pedagogies that deterritorialised the young people, youth and community workers, and youth and community work settings from the effects of GRV. This is demonstrated by the case of a GRV–youth and community work assemblage that centred on a conversation between young people, here using the pseudonyms Peter and Sam, and youth and community worker using the pseudonym Jordi at the ‘Pride LGBTQ+ Youth Group’. Here, the data are taken from an observation that took place during unstructured time at the pool table:

The young people started to play a game of pool. Peter asked Sam if they were “one of us”. Sam looked confused and asked Peter for clarification. Peter responded, “You are a trans man like me.” Still playing pool, Sam corrected Peter to say that they are non-binary, not trans, and became upset. Jordi intervened at this point and asked if he could play too. He mentioned that Sam had been misgendered and asked if they were okay. Jordi pointed out that Sam’s gender tags used the pronouns they/he and explained that sometimes non-binary people do not identify themselves as trans because they do not live in the binary. Jordi asked Sam if this was their experience and Sam responded, “Yes.” Jordi explained to Peter that we should never assume things about the people we meet but rather spend time getting to know them. Peter then had a conversation with Sam about their experiences of being non-binary. Sam talked about how they had come out and the similarities with Peter and Jordi’s experiences of coming out as transmasculine. As they started the second game of pool, I noticed how Sam and Peter’s rapport had developed. Their body language was more open, and they were joking and engaging in non-abusive banter. (Data source: A practice observation of a Youth Work Conversation Pride, Phase 2. 2 December 2017)

When read through an assemblage lens, this episode shows how GRV was diffused through the coming together of gender norms, prior knowledges, peer relations, the informal pool-table setting, and the embodiment of confusion, embarrassment, care, and attempted solidarity. Misgendering functioned here as a territorialising force: it momentarily stabilised non-binary exclusion within the interaction. Jordi’s intervention mattered not only because it corrected language, but because it reworked the affective economy of the encounter. By naming the misgendering, inviting Sam’s account, and modelling critical dialogue, Jordi mobilised queer and feminist pedagogic practices that deterritorialised the interaction, opening new relational possibilities between the young people. This illustrates a key analytical point: queer feminist youth and community work pedagogy disrupts GRV when it shifts an assemblage’s affective conditions, rather than merely transmitting information.

The deployment of norm-critical, feminist, and queer pedagogies was also evident in a GRV–youth and community work assemblage from the Tikkun Jewish youth group that participated in the CPAR. This assemblage centred on the creation of what the youth and community workers called a Brave Space Camp, where the pedagogic content focused on feminist and queer themes such as consent and LGBTQ+ inclusion. The following data extract is taken from the final interview with the lead youth and community worker, Yitzi, who was reflecting on the learning from the camp:

Yitzi: The Chanachim (young people) were all sitting in a circle as part of a group work activity. One of the madrichim (leaders) started to talk to the group about not using the term 'guys' as a collective for the group and why this was important. I could see the Chanicha (feminine young person) getting frustrated. She was disrupting and rolling her eyes and kept saying that she did not understand why we could not use it. For her it was just a common phrase, and she did not understand why it needed to be something to think about. The madrichim were giving her good answers about privileging masculinity and she did not like it. It was a frustration that led to resistance. She was giving her opinion but not willing to hear a different viewpoint.

Neil: Can you tell me more about what the madrachim did?

Yitzi: She kept saying, 'I am sick of people justifying why we can't use that phrase anymore.' It was clear that no one had engaged her in conversation with her views or given her space to learn. She said to the group, 'Put your hand up if you are offended by the term "guys",' and the madrichim stopped that and said it was not appropriate. She asked, 'Why?' The madrichim replied that she was putting people on the spot and that people might feel pushed into saying they liked the phrase when they did not. This seemed to open the space for others to say how they felt, and many agreed with the madrichim. There were a couple of other young people in the circle who also did not like the discussion but did not react in the same way. Some participants talked about how using the term 'guys' reinforces the idea that men are more important. It excluded people who do not identify as men altogether. They described how, for someone who may be non-binary or gender fluid, the term might make them feel invalidated: 'It's hurtful to be referred to as a guy when you are not.'

Yitzi: Then some of the other teens interrupted and said, 'I have non-binary friends at school and we really try hard not to say guys.' Some of the teens picked up on it and helped the others learn. It was not just an argument between her and the madrichim; it became more of a dialogue. The interesting thing is that, as the camp progressed, it was clear that she had changed her attitudes, and that came from the discussions and the two activities. She did not leave the circle feeling fully answered, and she learnt as camp progressed.

A similar dynamic is visible in the Brave Space Camp assemblage. Here, cissexist language operated as a territorialising social practice that attempted to stabilise masculinity as the norm. The leaders' intervention did not eliminate conflict; rather, it worked through discomfort. Their questioning slowed the interaction down, prevented the public pressuring of peers, and created conditions for multiple participants to articulate why the phrase was harmful. In analytical terms, this was a deterritorialising move: it unsettled an apparently ordinary linguistic practice and made its gendered effects available for collective scrutiny. The example also demonstrates that the impetus for pedagogic change was distributed across the group rather than residing solely in the adult leaders. Other young people became part of the deterritorialising force by contributing their own experiences and knowledges. This matters for the framework proposed here because it suggests that the pedagogic capacities needed to disrupt GRV include not only critical reflexivity and ethical

care, but also the ability to hold discomfort long enough for alternative understandings and relations to emerge. Both examples show how the social practices of GRV territorialise young people and youth and community workers and how countering them with norm-critical, feminist, and queer youth and community work pedagogic practices disrupts GRV through processes of deterritorialisation.

4.1.2. Non-Human Materiality in Critical Youth and Community Work Pedagogy

The second major finding concerns the vitality of non-human materiality in critical youth and community work pedagogic praxis. Across the assemblages, materials and spaces were not passive contexts for practice; they actively shaped what could be experienced. This is significant because it extends the analysis beyond a human-centred account of intervention (Gorman et al., 2024). The empirical material suggests that practitioners disrupt GRV more effectively when they become attuned to how objects, environments, and artefacts participate in pedagogic processes. Both extracts below show that non-human materials did not simply accompany pedagogic action; they helped produce its affective conditions.

Sam and Jack talked about how interesting it would be to have more discussion in the group about coming out experiences of the different genders that attend the club and how they could create a zine with these experiences. Jordi mentioned that there were many different genders and that this may be a good way of learning about all the different ways that people identify and express their gender and help to trouble some of the assumptions people make about non-binary people. . . At the debrief, Jordi talked about his experience and reflected on how the informal setting of playing pool had enabled him to have a critical conversation about gender diversity and help two young people develop a supportive and nourishing relationship. He also talked about being an ally to non-binary folk and how this motivated him to intervene and turn this into a teachable moment. (Data source: A practice observation of a Youth Work Conversation Pride, Phase 2, 2 December 2017)

Yitzi: The girls' [youth work session] programme was on consent and rape and the boys' programme was on pro-feminism. I ran the girls' session, and they said it was a great session. They discussed consent and we used the GAP WORK Project resources to help with this. After the session, the girls suggested that they run it for the boys and that the boys run a similar session for the girls on pro-feminism. They educated each other. The session that the boys ran for the girls focused on gender inclusion—including different perceptions of gender and sexism—and from this they made this wonderful banner out of paper that they called the equality banner. This was made by the boys, who wrote different statements in felt-tip pen that they came up with to promote gender equality. It has things on it like: boys and girls are equal; boys have emotions; boys, don't be afraid of periods etc. The boys made this banner for the corridor that separated the dorms, and they then discussed it. It had a real impact.

Neil: What do you see as the impact?

Yitzi: The boys' behaviour towards the girls changed—there was less inappropriate sexual banter. The girls also seemed more willing to talk about their experiences.

Neil: Can you give me an example?

Yitzi: The boys used to tease the girls about 'being on the blob' when they had their periods. This changed after the banner was made. There was more empathy with the girls.

At Pride LGBT Youth Club, the pool table mattered because it organised the encounter as a side-by-side, low-stakes interaction, enabling a difficult conversation about gender

diversity to unfold with less confrontation. In cartographic terms, the pool table formed part of the assemblage's affect economy: it helped generate an informal, more open relational space in which misgendering could be addressed and solidarity could develop. At the Brave Space Camp, the banner, paper, and felt-tip pens similarly became active components in the deterritorialisation of GRV. They allowed young people to externalise ideas, materialise counter-normative commitments, and circulate those commitments through the camp space. The equality banner then continued to act beyond the moment of its making by reorienting the corridor environment and supporting more respectful interactions. These examples strengthen the article's central claim that youth and community work practitioners need sociomaterial attunement: the capacity to notice how matter, space, and discourse intra-act, and to mobilise those relations as part of pedagogic practice to disrupt harmful gendered assemblages.

Feely's (2020) concluded that architecture affected the participants in his study. In this study, the architecture and space at Tikkun and the Pride LGBTQ+ Youth centre where also affected the young people. This is demonstrated in the extract below, where Yitzi talks about how a gender-neutral space was reclaimed using safe-zone stickers during the Brave Space Camp:

Yitzi: The movement passed a motion at veida (conference) a couple of years ago that all residential events, where the site allows, have to have a gender-neutral bathroom, and we had one at camp this year, but we had some complaints from participants that the space was being misused and that cis people were using it as a space to hook up with others. . .

Yitzi: Remember I talked to you about the safe zones? We put these stickers in every room. We had Pride flags as well. And we made sure they understood the gender-neutral toilet is a safe zone too.

Taken together, these cases show that sociomaterial attunement is not an abstract theoretical aspiration but a practical pedagogic capacity. Practitioners were able to intervene more effectively when they recognised that GRV was assembled through spatial arrangements, objects, symbols, discourses, and embodied affects, not only through individual intention. Safe-zone stickers, pride flags, a pool table, a banner, and the organisation of space all participated in either stabilising or unsettling gendered norms. The analytical contribution of these findings, therefore, is to show how critical youth and community work praxis can be understood as the deliberate reworking of sociomaterial assemblages. This moves the discussion beyond description by making clear how empirical moments connect to the broader pedagogic capacities identified in the study: critical reflexivity, an ethics of care, comfort with discomfort, creativity, and attunement to the affective force of human and non-human relations.

5. Discussion: Challenges, Opportunities and Future Directions for Youth and Community Work Pedagogy

The findings show that disrupting gender-related violence (GRV) in youth and community work requires pedagogies that are relational, critical, and sociomaterially attuned. Rather than treating GRV as a problem of individual attitudes alone, the analysis demonstrates that it is assembled through relations among bodies, discourses, spaces, artefacts, and institutional conditions. The two capacities identified in the findings—critical norm-disruptive pedagogy and sociomaterial attunement—therefore provide the basis for the six-principle framework developed in the next section. The discussion brings the empirical findings into dialogue with wider scholarship and considers what they mean for both formal and informal youth and community work practitioner formation, while recognising

that the evidence presented here is drawn from practice-based research in England and offers accounts of practice rather than direct evidence about professional education.

One of the most pressing challenges for youth and community work education and practice is the dominance of neoliberal audit cultures, which prioritise measurable outcomes, standardised competencies, and risk management (de St Croix, 2018). When youth and community work is required to evidence and quantify its value in these ways, there is little room for the relational, creative, and emergent practices that are essential for disrupting GRV (Cooper-Levitan, 2025). This echoes wider critiques of youth and community work's increasing bureaucratisation, which constrains practitioners' ability to engage in critical, social justice-oriented practice (de St Croix, 2018; Taylor et al., 2018).

Another challenge lies in the persistence of residual humanism within youth and community work education and praxis (Pisani, 2023). This limits practitioners' ability to recognise the vitality of non-human materiality in the production of social reality. The findings of this study demonstrate that GRV is not simply a matter of individual behaviour but emerges through the entanglement of bodies, objects, spaces, and discourses. Preparing practitioners to navigate these assemblages requires pedagogies that move beyond human-centred assumptions and embrace sociomaterial ways of knowing (Pisani, 2023; Ringrose et al., 2020a; Gorman et al., 2024).

The opportunities identified by the study are equally important. The CPAR process showed that when practitioners are given structured space to reflect collectively, experiment, and analyse practice, they can develop more nuanced responses to GRV. The findings suggest that youth and community work education can build on this by integrating sociomaterial literacy, critical incident analysis, creative methods, and reflexive dialogue into professional learning. In this sense, the proposed framework below should be understood as a practice-informed set of pedagogic principles derived from the empirical analysis, not as a universal model. Its value lies in offering a way to connect the study's findings to the professional formation of future youth and community workers while remaining open to adaptation in other contexts.

6. A Critical Posthumanist Pedagogic Framework for Youth and Community Work Education

Building on the discussion above, this section translates the two empirical capacities identified in the findings into a concise critical posthumanist pedagogic framework for youth and community work education. The framework is grounded in Feminist New Materialism and Critical Posthumanism and is intended as a heuristic for thinking about practitioner formation. A key implication for practitioner education is that it cannot rely on competency-based or behaviourist models alone. Such approaches may be useful for some aspects of professional formation, but they are insufficient for preparing practitioners to work with the uncertainty, complexity, and distributed agency visible in the findings. If GRV emerges through assemblages, then practitioner learning can include conceptual and practical tools for reading those assemblages, intervening in their affective economies, and reflecting critically on one's own participation within them. This is where the study speaks to wider international debates in education and youth and community work that call for pedagogies capable of unsettling normative assumptions, working ethically with discomfort, and responding to sociomaterial conditions of harm (Andreotti, 2021; Keddie, 2021; Ginwright & James, 2002). The framework is built on six interrelated principles:

6.1. *Ontological and Agential Realist Foundations*

At its core, the framework begins with an ontological shift in youth and community work praxis from humanism to agential realism (Pisani, 2023). Practitioners must be

introduced to a sociomaterial ontology that recognises the entanglement of matter and meaning, beyond humanism or residual humanism (Kemmis, 2019). This shift focuses on the distributed nature of agency and the relational emergence of practice as assemblage.

6.2. Sociomaterial Mapping and Attunement

In this framework, practitioners learn to map and interpret the sociomaterial assemblages that shape youth and community work settings and affect young people's lives, noticing how bodies, objects, spaces, and discourses interact to produce the social reality of youth and community work and young people.

6.3. Working with Affect Economies

Practitioners develop an understanding of how affect economies produce youth and community work practices. This involves learning to map processes of territorialisation, reterritorialisation, and deterritorialisation, and to recognise how shifts in affective and material relations can become drivers for social change.

6.4. Creative Pedagogies

Training programmes can include hands-on engagement with creative tools, artefacts, and spatial reconfigurations, helping practitioners to develop confidence in using non-human materials as agents of learning.

6.5. Ethics of Care and Critical Reflexivity

Practitioners cultivate critical, sociomaterially attuned reflexivity and an ethics of care as they learn to navigate the emotional and ethical complexities of youth and community work that addresses challenges such as GRV. Stepping outside a cause-and-effect logic for the evaluation of youth and community work enables practitioners to value learning about themselves and others, including where their own 'gaps' are. Practitioners learn to navigate ambiguity, emergent situations, and nonlinear change, developing comfort with not knowing and engaging in ongoing critical reflection and experimentation.

6.6. Opportunities and Challenges for Implementation

To operationalise these principles, the framework can include specific pedagogic practices such as assemblage mapping exercises, critical incident analysis, creative workshops with a focus on the use of resources, norm-critical, feminist and queer dialogue sessions, and collective critical reflection activities. These practices help practitioners develop the capacities identified in the findings and prepare them to navigate the complexities of GRV in practice. For this framework to be effective, training programmes must create institutional conditions that support critically reflective practice, collaborative learning, messy creativity, and organisational commitment to anti-oppressive practice. This includes resisting the pressures of audit cultures and creating spaces where practitioners can engage in relational, creative, and emergent forms of learning for themselves as well as for the young people in their youth and community work sessions.

7. Conclusions

Preparing future youth and community work practitioners to respond to challenges such as gender-related violence requires a fundamental rethinking of youth and community work pedagogic praxis. Drawing on Feminist New Materialism and Critical Posthumanism, the findings from the doctoral research project demonstrate that youth and community work can disrupt GRV when it employs norm-critical, feminist, and queer pedagogies that mobilise the vitality of non-human materials and create micropolitical shifts within GRV assemblages. Although the research was conducted in England, its implications extend

beyond that setting because practitioners internationally are grappling with gendered violence, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, structural inequality, and the limits of humanist or competency-based professional education.

The proposed critical posthumanist pedagogic framework therefore offers a practice-informed contribution to wider debates in youth and community work education about how practitioners can be prepared to work with complexity, uncertainty, discomfort, care, and sociomaterial entanglement. These implications are practice-informed and future research should explore how the framework travels across different professional, organisational, cultural, and national contexts. Taken together, the findings align with international scholarship in education and youth and community work that calls for relational, justice-oriented, and sociomaterially attuned pedagogies capable of addressing gender-related violence across diverse settings. In a context of austerity, managerialism, and social inequality, such pedagogies are not only desirable but necessary. They offer a means of reclaiming youth and community work's radical, relational, and emancipatory potential, and of preparing practitioners to support young people in imagining and creating more equitable futures.

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