Safer spaces

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SAFER SPACES

Ruth A. Deller

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the notions of 'safer spaces' – places where people from different marginalised groups can gather, speak and be resourced in safety. Safer spaces can be physical, but they are also cultural – framed by a series of boundaries, principles and practices designed to support members of the group(s) needing the safer space. I explore here some of the motivations and underlying principles of safer spaces, and the roles they can play in radical politics. This chapter focuses predominantly on examples relating to gender, sex, ethnicity, health and dis/ability although the cultivation of safer spaces can also include practices such as creating equality and diversity policies; providing appropriate dietary options for vegetarians, vegans, members of different faith groups and those with food allergies or other medical conditions; health and safety policies that ensure the physical safety of events and organisations, and ethics policies that ensure appropriate research and professional conduct in a variety of contexts. I explore a number of ways safer spaces operate in different contexts such as education, healthcare and political groups and consider their implications as spaces of resistance, mobilisation and care – as well as media debates over safer spaces and political activism.

I also reflect on the outcomes of four workshops (two in the UK, two in the USA) with academics, educators and activists discussing issues of social justice and safe spaces and sharing experiences of implementing different strategies. The number of attendants at each workshop varied; in the smallest events, in the UK, there were around twenty participants and in the largest, in the USA, around fifty, and in the other two events approximately thirty to forty participants. A range of ethnic, gender and sexual identities were present in all four events, although the majority lived in Western countries (some as immigrants from places including India, Pakistan and Singapore). The ages of participants varied from 18 to 60.[1]

In the last few years, issues relating to 'safe spaces' have dominated newspaper headlines around the world – as ideas and practices well established in political movements have increasingly spread to workplaces, educational establishments and Internet groups. The phenomenon of safer spaces and different aspects associated with these, such as trigger warnings (TWs) and practices of inclusivity (e.g. gender-neutral language, diversity policies) have garnered coverage and debate in both traditional and newer media outlets.[2]

While media coverage of safe spaces often portrays them as a recent trend, practices of creating safe (or rather, *safer*, as no environment can necessarily be completely safe) spaces are not new to those involved in radical politics. Challenging dominant discourses and power structures through activities such as 'no platforming', implementing TWs, establishing boundaries around meetings, privileging minority voices and creating protected physical spaces have long been part of the ethos and praxis of feminist, queer and other radical groups.

At the heart of creating safer spaces is the acknowledgement that, while the world is not truly 'safe' for anyone, it is more dangerous for some than others. Gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, class, dis/ability and many other factors contribute to the status or privilege different individuals have within any society as well as their personal safety. The types of danger vary, but can include violence, verbal abuse, bullying, exclusion, discrimination, harm to property, inequality of access to services, resources or justice, emotional trauma and even death. Harm may result from encounters between individuals, or it may be embedded within institutionalised practices and customs that favour some groups over others. It is worth noting here that within many of the debates around harm and safety, the concept of 'offence' regularly recurs. Critics of safer-space practices often perceive 'offence' as distinct from 'harm'; yet, it is often difficult to distinguish between the two in practice. For example, when racist slurs are used against others, it is often difficult to draw a clear line between 'hurt' and 'offence' in that person's affective response. In this article, I will, therefore, focus more on notions of 'harm' or 'hurt', except when discussing examples that specifically reference 'offence' – while acknowledging that this area is far from clear-cut.

Safer-space practice is about understanding and prioritising the needs of the most at-risk – not as a way of sealing them off from the realities of life, but as a way of resourcing, equipping and supporting people to meet those realities. It is about challenging and transforming those realities. The direct action group Sisters Uncut explain: 'Sisters Uncut aims to create a respectful, compassionate and kind space… When we come together to organise in a respectful and considerate way, we are creating the change we want to see in the world' (Sisters Uncut 2016). To give another example, Black Lives Matter states:

> We are committed to collectively, lovingly and courageously working vigorously for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension all people. As we forge our path, we intentionally build and nurture a beloved community that is bonded together through a beautiful struggle that is restorative, not depleting.
>
> *(Black Lives Matter 2017)*

In many countries, we could argue that there have been a number of positive improvements for members of groups that have historically been marginalised: the legalisation of same-sex marriage; increased visibility and acceptance of trans and non-binary individuals; heightened awareness of a range of mental and physical health problems; public examples of 'calling out' behaviour that could be seen as racist, sexist, homophobic and so on. Media, education, healthcare and politics have all been shaped by equality politics in radical ways over the last 100 years and there is increasing recognition of the ways in which dominant groups have marginalised and oppressed non-dominant groups. We could certainly argue that many countries are now legally, politically and culturally safer spaces for those who have historically suffered systemic oppression.

Sadly, of course, despite these changes, there are still many ways in which even the most liberal societies remain unequal and unsafe as others in this collection discuss. Some improvement in these areas does not mean all battles have been won. The Black Lives Matter movement emerged during Obama's presidency. As a response to the killing of (often young) black men at the hands of white police, the movement is a stark reminder that the reality for many black Americans is one in which they – and even Obama himself – are still subject to systemic racism. As Morgan notes,

> An exemplary black man was elected into the highest office in the nation – twice – and not only was he subjected to the harshest, most racially-charged criticism himself, but the day-to-day lives of black and brown people improved very little… When people are already dying en masse, it is belittling to argue that it's better than it was. If 1892 was the most violent year of lynchings in the United States –161 black people that we know of were murdered – then what good does it do to tell black youth that things are better if 258 black people were killed by police in 2016? The comparative lens doesn't hold.
>
> *(Morgan 2017)*

Contemporary radical movements explicitly draw attention to the continuing insecurity felt particularly in minority communities. Black Lives Matter says:

> We are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity.
>
> *(Black Lives Matter 2017)*

The Women's March reiterates the point:

> We must create a society in which women – including Black women, Native women, poor women, immigrant women, disabled women, Muslim women, lesbian queer and trans women – are free and able to care for and nurture their families, however they are formed, in safe and healthy environments free from structural impediments.
>
> *(Women's March 2017)*

Activists seek to carve out safer space at multiple levels – from the macro level of large-scale campaigns and interventions that bring societal change, to the micro level of cultivating localised safer spaces within small communities. Many of the examples discussed in this chapter are small-scale – individual educators and their students; activist bloggers; sexual health centres. Others are networked groups campaigning to affect changes across multiple locations, such as Rhodes Must Fall (RMF), an international movement calling for the decolonisation of university campuses – including the removal of colonial iconography.

What I present here is not so much a 'how-to', but a reflection on the complexities and challenges of creating safer spaces, both in terms of the practical implications and the implications for challenging power and privilege. I focus here both on physical and cultural forms of safer space, recognising that different contexts require different strategies.

Safer Spaces and Physical Environments

In this section, I explore a range of ways that physical environments can be created or modified as forms of safer space.[3] Physical forms of safer space may include modifications to existing spaces to make them safer for a range of users; providing resources and spaces solely for the use of one group (e.g. rooms, events, transport, festivals, hostels, addiction support meetings, therapy centres). Other forms of physical safer space may include neighbourhoods, cities or even countries that, while not necessarily 'exclusive' to one particular group, offer freedom, sanctuary and a sense of community – e.g. districts that have high concentrations of immigrant or LGBTQ+ residents and businesses (see Kenney 2001; Hanhardt 2013), or the idea of 'cities of sanctuary' (Darling 2010; Squire 2011) that welcome refugees.

Although we might often think of safer spaces as being *distinct* spaces set aside for the use of particular groups (and I will discuss such spaces later in this section), activists and campaigners have a long history of highlighting that the built environment is often unsafe for members of marginalised communities, and have sought to effect change. While there is a growing awareness of the need to make buildings accessible for people with disabilities (although there is still a long way to go here), physical environments and public spaces also have gendered and racialised components that may not present the same physical barriers as, say a set of steps would pose to a wheelchair user, but offer symbolic barriers instead.

For example, public toilets pose a number of issues when we think about safe and inclusive spaces. Traditionally, public toilets have segregated people along binary gender lines with traditional 'male' and 'female' designations. Accessible toilets, commonly marked out with the wheelchair symbol, on the other hand, serve to de-gender people with disabilities as well as reinforcing the idea that all people who might need such a facility use wheelchairs.

The binary-gendering of public toilets poses challenges for non-binary individuals who either have to choose a gender identity for the purposes of relieving themselves or use the disabled facility when they are not disabled – something not always possible, as in the case of disabled toilets requiring a Radar key or similar to enter, nor desirable as it may prevent a disabled person from using it. Gender-neutral toilets are slowly becoming more commonplace (see Sanghani 2015), although there are often cultural and practical reasons why these are hard to implement everywhere.

However, even for those who identify as male or female, public toilets can prove challenging. In the USA, for example, there were a number of headlines in 2016 generated by the idea of 'bathroom bills', such as North Carolina's Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act which requires individuals to use the toilets for the sex assigned on their birth certificate, which means transpeople who have not had their birth certificate altered (and in some states, this is only possible following full reassignment surgery) have to use the toilet of the sex on their birth certificate, rather than the gender they identify as – thus meaning transwomen have to use men's toilets and vice versa. Furthermore, if users do not carry their birth certificates, there is the chance people could be refused use of the bathroom even if they have the 'correct' genitals if they don't look sufficiently 'male' or 'female'. These bills often use the idea of 'safety' as a justification:

> The federal government's mandate requiring Texas public schools to provide students
> access to restrooms, showers, and dressing rooms based on an individual student's inter-
> nal sense of gender is alarming and could potentially lead to boys and girls showering

together… children receiving an education in Texas public schools and open-enrollment charter schools are entitled to a safe and secure learning environment, including when using intimate facilities.

(Texas Senate Bill 6, cited in Ura and Murphy 2017)

The North Carolina act specifically removed 'gender' as a basis for safeguarding individuals, replacing it with 'biological sex', and claiming that the bathroom policy was not discriminatory because of this:

It is the public policy of this State to protect and safeguard the right and opportunity of all individuals within the State to enjoy fully and equally… places of public accommodation free of discrimination because of race, religion, color, national origin, or biological sex, provided that designating multiple or single occupancy bathrooms or changing facilities according to biological sex, as defined in G.S. 143–760(a)(1), (3), and (5), shall not be deemed to constitute discrimination.

(General Assembly of North Carolina 2016: 5)

Despite the rhetoric of 'safety' as a rationale for these bills, many commentators note that there is little-to-no risk to cisgendered users from transindividuals using the bathroom aligning with their gender identity. For example, 'CNN reached out to 20 law enforcement agencies in states with anti-discrimination policies covering gender identity. None who answered reported any bathroom assaults after the policies took effect' (Grinberg and Stewart 2017). The symbolic denial of transpeople's experience in these bills acts as a form of harm in numerous ways. In research conducted with trans and non-binary individuals, Herman (2013) identified instances of bullying, verbal and physical assault, stress, social exclusion and even urinary and kidney problems linked to their experiences of using toilets.

The problems of space are not confined to toilets, however. Faces and bodies represented in posters, banners and signs also play a role in signifying who is, and is not included in a community – and architecture and artworks likewise have a role to play in creating the culture of physical environments, from steps inaccessible by wheelchair users to statues celebrating only old white men, the way space is constructed both symbolically and practically reinforces and normalises forms of injustice and discrimination.

Several student-led movements have recently highlighted racial inequalities on university campuses. For example, the campaign I, Too, Am Harvard and its equivalents at other universities, including Oxford, featured photographs from students from different minority ethnic groups holding cards detailing some of the racist comments they had encountered from others on campus. These students articulated how they found the public spaces of the universities exclusionary and unsafe: 'Our voices often go unheard on this campus, our experiences are devalued, our presence is questioned – this project is our way of speaking back, of claiming this campus, of standing up to say: We are here. This place is ours' (I, Too, Am Harvard 2014); 'Students in their daily encounters at Oxford are made to feel different and Othered from the Oxford community' (I, Too, Am Oxford 2014).

Another high-profile campaign, RMF, is an international movement calling for the decolonisation of university campuses – including the removal of colonial iconography, such as statues of Cecil Rhodes.[4] The two most publicised campaigns of RMF were its calls to topple statues of Rhodes in Cape Town and Oxford. The former was successful, with the statue

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removed in April 2015, while (at the time of writing) the statue in Oxford remains. As with 'I, Too, Am…', RMF highlighted systemic issues within universities that were compounded by the presence of iconography such as the Rhodes statues in public spaces on campus, reinforcing a sense for black and minority ethnic students and staff that this space was not one in which they were safe or welcome. Its aims included:

> Tackling the plague of colonial iconography (in the form of statues, plaques and paintings) that seeks to whitewash and distort history… Reforming the Euro-centric curriculum … Addressing the underrepresentation and lack of welfare provision for Black and minority ethnic (BME) amongst Oxford's academic staff and students. RMFO is about more than a statue. However, we believe that statues and symbols matter; they are a means through which communities express their values. The normalised glorification of a man who for so many is a symbol of their historical oppression is a tacit admission that – as it stands – Oxford does not consider their history to be important.
>
> *(RMF Oxford 2015)*

Movements like RMF have, at their heart, an agenda to highlight the way practices of marginalisation, discrimination and oppression are embedded into everyday life through the physical environment, and that which may seem 'normal' and 'everyday' often represents systemic inequalities. The responses to the movement from Oxford's chancellor and vice chancellor (who are both white) demonstrated a lack of willingness to engage with the issues raised, instead criticising the students and, ironically, claiming that students were stifling debate, while themselves refusing to debate the situation. For example, on Radio 4's *Today* show, the Chancellor, Chris Patten, said that, perhaps, the students who did not approve of the statue 'should think about being educated elsewhere' and argued: 'People have to face up to facts in history which they don't like and talk about them and debate them' (cited in Gayle and Khomami 2016), while vice chancellor Louise Richardson wanted students to 'appreciate the value of engaging with ideas they find objectionable … without forgetting the traditions that bind us to our forebears' (cited in Oxford University 2016).

'Freedom of speech' was cited as a reason for keeping the statue; yet, statues do not speak. Other arguments cited the need to understand and respect history rather than erase it; yet, such arguments have been thin on the ground when statues of Lenin, Hitler, Sadaam Hussein and even Jimmy Savile have been removed from public spaces around the world. Indeed, the toppling of statues is an act imbued with symbolism, and politicians and media have often celebrated the act as symbolising change. As Rao observes,

> It has been fascinating to watch pillars of the British establishment deride RMFO's demand for the removal of the Rhodes statue as an impingement on freedom of thought, when in fact the British state and media have, in other contexts, treated the toppling of statues as synonymous with the embrace of freedom … statues are never merely symbolic, which is also to say that there is nothing mere about symbolism.
>
> *(Rao 2016)*

This long history of statue-toppling as a symbolic act is precisely why it has formed a core part of RMF's call to action – something largely ignored by the movement's critics.

As with many such arguments about 'pampered' students, the disregard for RMF's grievances and protests appears to be the alternative of 'free' speech. By characterising student protest thus, those in power appear, instead, to be trying to silence debate and thus avoid

looking at the continued legacy of systemic privilege and oppression. RMFO spoke out against this hypocrisy:

> The new Vice-Chancellor, Louise Richardson, when asked about Rhodes Must Fall in May 2016 responded by talking about 'cosseted' students and the need for free speech, forgetting the fact that Rhodes Must Fall has always aimed to start a debate about colonisation, slavery and historical injustice at Oxford. It is the University that has tried to shut down this debate. It is the University that has wanted to create a safe space – to commemorate and thus valorise colonialism and slavery.

(RMFO 2016)

While I have thus far discussed attempts to make public spaces safer, there are examples of activist groups carving out specific spaces to gather, be they online groups, or dedicated rooms and buildings. Such congregating allows strategic visibility for marginalised communities, as Kenney notes, '[v]isibility, in the context of gay and lesbian activism, has been at the centre of collective attempts to confront the risk … Place works as both a physical and social site of resistance and as a manifestation of shared meaning in specific contexts and communities' (2001: 15).

In the same vein, forms of activism such as public protests, marches, vigils and rallies are often about creating temporal safer spaces in often unsafe public arenas. Through mobilising large numbers of people to gather with a common agenda, marches and other gatherings attempt to reclaim space for those often marginalised by it. Chan (2004) notes that, for example, the long-running women's march Reclaim The Night 'creates a space for women only, where they feel strengthened by the sense of richness and connectedness with other women. Women can have a sense of claiming the spaces which they have once thought of as fearful such as walking the streets alone at night' (p20. See also: Bhavnani and Coulson 1986; Hanhardt 2008).

Physical safe space can allow marginalised individuals to group together, both for mobilisation to collective action and for collective care (Kenney 2001). It can provide sanctuary and protection for victims of violence or respite and care for people experiencing a mental health crisis. It provides those struggling with addictions a place to share their experiences and support one another's recovery. In many varied ways, physical safe space offers a place of refuge, retreat and regrouping. Successful safer spaces enable users to live more effectively in the wider world. For example, Garcia et al.'s (2015) work highlights how safer spaces for black men who have sex with men, including specific spaces for those with HIV, give users a sense of community while empowering them to live and thrive when social and bureaucratic infrastructures fail them. Likewise, LGBTQ+ young people studied by Richard Barry (2000) used their safer spaces as ways of exploring and owning their identities and questioning the power and norms of the wider world, drawing strength from each other.

Contrary to much of the criticism of safer spaces as places to 'hide from ideas' (Berg, 2015), safer spaces are not meant to be separate from the world around them; rather, they offer space to return to and go from. Those who use safer spaces are usually fully aware of, and engaged in, the so-called 'real world'. It is the exposure to 'real world' prejudice, hatred, violence, abuse and damage that makes safer spaces important as a way of tending to the wounds caused by living day-to-day in that world.

In addition to the examples outlined in this chapter, there are many other issues surrounding the physical safety of spaces. At one of the workshops we ran in the USA, a university

lecturer spoke about her fear for her physical safety and that of her colleagues and students now that guns were to be allowed on campus (and, of course, both advocates and opponents of guns use the rhetoric of safety and security to justify their position). As a Brit to whom such a threat is entirely alien, I do not feel able to comment on how to stay safe in such a context, although Firmin DeBrabander's *Do Guns Make Us Free?* (2015) is an interesting discussion of the issue from an American perspective.[5]

Whether through carving out rooms or venues for groups together, mobilising in public for a march or calling for the gender, racial and ability inequalities in spaces to be addressed, physical safer spaces can play an important role in supporting activists, mobilising the marginalised and, ultimately, securing changes to make all spaces safer for those who use them.

Setting the Boundaries of Safer Spaces

When it comes to safer-space practice, boundary setting is a crucial component, whether we are talking about physical safer spaces such as specialist rooms, or more conceptual safer spaces, such as online communities or activist groups. Establishing who can and cannot 'come in', and why, and agreeing what is and is not acceptable within the space contribute to helping it feel safe for members.

In the workshops on safer spaces, one challenge many people spoke of was how to set boundaries around safe space that were protective of those who needed the space without being hostile or unnecessarily exclusionary. Different groups adopted different strategies, from focusing on participant identification – e.g. queer spaces with a policy of 'if you identify as queer, you're welcome' (and similar for women-only spaces), to specific boundary-marking practices such as listing codes of conduct outside the entrance to venues and expecting entrants to abide by them. Many groups used identifiers such as flags and graphics to symbolise the groups a space was designed for. Likewise, in online communities, boundary creation occurred through practices such as users agreeing to terms and conditions, clearly worded mission statements and, again, visual signifiers such as flags and icons.

Of course, while boundary creation serves ideally to protect members of a community, it can sometimes be perceived as hostile or discriminatory, such as in the case of women/womyn-only spaces that exclude transwomen, the most famous example being the now defunct Michigan Womyn's Festival, which had a 'womyn-born-womyn' policy – meaning those assigned female at birth. When it comes to enacting boundaries and process of inclusion/exclusion, what is always at stake is power and identity. Excluding transwomen serves to misgender them, and reinforces their status as marginalised outsiders. Cisgender women thus exercise their power and privilege by excluding transwomen, which perhaps runs counter to a sense of sisterhood or female solidarity.

In a similar vein, there have been numerous examples of feminist and queer spaces often perpetuating other forms of 'othering' and exclusion through the dominance of white and able-bodied individuals (Simons 1979; Lloyd 2001; Poynter and Washington 2005). Even at one of the workshops we ran, where we thought we had established a culture of inclusivity which gave everyone a chance to speak, we encountered the challenges of intersecting identities. A middle-aged white cisgender gay man clashed with two younger contributors (one female and Asian; the other white and non-binary – their sexual orientations were not disclosed). While their disagreement was merely on how to enact cultures of safer space, drawing on their own experiences, they felt that he was using the power accorded to him by his ethnicity, age and gender to speak over them and they became hostile towards him. He, then, responded out of hurt, calling attention to his membership of a minority community

(Irish Travellers) that had long suffered abuse on both an ethnic and class-based level and that he, as a middle-aged gay man, had also suffered prejudices for this identity in ways that he perceived younger queer people might not. Although we, as facilitators, attempted to mitigate the tension by allowing each of them to speak, the younger participants left the session early and one of my colleagues spent significant time after the session talking with the man concerned. This incident reminded us that, often, people's experiences of discrimination and hurt are never far from the surface, even in seemingly 'safe' environments.

Cultures of Safer Spaces

Regardless of whether we are referring to a physically bounded space or not, safer spaces are about developing a culture in which members feel safe to belong, to speak, to gather, to heal and to build from. All the decolonised campuses and gender-neutral toilets in the world mean little if they are not accompanied by practices of inclusivity, respect and care.

Practices adopted in safer spaces vary according to context, but almost always involve creating a set of guidelines or code of practice outlining the values of the space and the expectations of users. These, ideally, should be created by members of the group – although in larger institutions such as schools or hospitals, this may be harder to achieve en masse and may operate more at local levels (although campaigning for policy change is a huge part of the work of radical politics).

Groups differ significantly in how they establish and practice their boundaries. For some in the workshops, such as a young queer activist group, and an addiction recovery group, these codes are pinned on walls, visibly reinforcing the formally presented boundaries and values. Some of the teachers we spoke to asked their students to set the culture of lessons at the start of the academic year – although varied in practice as to what extent this was formalised into a set of guidelines, code of conduct or similar.

However, there is more to creating and enacting cultures of safer space than writing guidelines and policies. There are several practices groups can engage in to try and create this safety. Some of these may be about applying legal or institutional regulations such as having equality and diversity policies or complying with human rights legislation. But there are also smaller actions, often on a local level, that can be adopted. No platforming, the adoption of inclusive language and TWs are three examples discussed below.

No Platforming

One such action is the process of 'no-platforming' – a concept that has made headlines in the 2010s as a result of the complaints that high-profile figures including writers Julie Bindel and Milo Yiannopoulo, Australian second-wave feminist thinker Germaine Greer and UK rights activist Peter Tatchell have been no-platformed and barred from speaking at events, most notably at universities (Morris 2015, Sterne and Spargo 2015). No platforming is a process whereby groups or individuals are denied permission to speak in certain groups or venues. The National Union of Students (NUS), for example, has a no-platform policy against extremist groups such as the British National Party and Hizb ut-tahrir (NUS 2017).

There is a lot of misunderstanding about no platforming and speakers have sometimes claimed that they have been 'no platformed' when in fact no policy exists. For example, the oft-repeated claim that the NUS has an official no-platform policy against Julie Bindel, because she 'is vile', is inaccurate (Lewis 2015). While individual university unions or

groups within the NUS have separate no-platforming policies, the NUS as a whole has only no-platformed *organisations*.

The safety issues with which no platforming is associated are also sometimes lost in public debates. A 2015 Cardiff University students' petition to stop Germaine Greer, giving a guest lecture due to her anti-transgender views (among other things, Greer has said that transgender women are not women (see McMahon 2015)) was all-too-often presented as a 'campaign to silence her' (Morris 2015) rather than a legitimate criticism of her views on transpeople. The event was not cancelled, although others have been. An event on 'free speech' featuring Julie Bindel and Milo Yiannopoulos at Manchester Students' Union (Sterne and Spargo 2015) was stopped because the Union felt that their 'views could incite hatred against both trans★ people and women who have experienced sexual violence' and breach the safe space policy (Manchester Students' Union 2015).

Criticisms of these protests almost always refer to the importance of 'freedom of speech'. *Spiked* Deputy Editor Tom Slater calls no platforming 'a palpable threat to the founding principles of the academy, and, by connection, democratic society' (2016). However, one of the fundamental problems with the deification of 'free speech' is that speech is rarely, if ever, free. Structural inequalities continue to promote certain voices over others and therefore an alleged 'freedom' inevitably means that the loudest voices tend to be those with certain privileges. Tatchell, Greer, Bindel and Yianoppolous all have access to a range of platforms via the status conferred on them by their celebrity (as well as age, ethnicity, career background and other factors); academics have status conferred on them by their roles and qualifications and, of course, male, white, middle-aged cisgender and heterosexual voices remain the loudest in many contexts. As Ahmed puts it,

> Whenever people keep being given a platform to say they have no platform, or whenever people speak endlessly about being silenced, you not only have a performative contradiction; you are witnessing a mechanism of power. I often describe diversity work as mechanical work. We know a lot about the mechanisms of power when we try to transform the norms embedded in a situation.
>
> *(Ahmed 2015)*

Arguments about 'freedom of speech' need to also acknowledge the structural inequalities and systemic injustices and abuses that facilitate the need for 'safer spaces' in the first place. Often, such valorisation of freedom of speech merely legitimises the rights of racists, homophobes and others to perpetuate prejudicial ideologies by presenting them merely as part of a 'debate' – and campaigners seeking to challenge this prejudice through protest, no platforming or other forms of creating safe space are often characterised as bullying or unreasonable. Such discourse only serves to further disempower those voices:

> Transphobia and anti-trans statements should not be treated as just another viewpoint that we should be free to express at a happy diversity table … When you have dialogue or debate with those who wish to eliminate you from the conversation (because they do not recognise what is necessary for your survival or because they don't even think your existence is possible), then dialogue and debate becomes another technique of elimination. A refusal to have some dialogues and some debates can thus be a key tactic for survival. The presentation of trans activists as a lobby and as bullies rather than as minorities who are constantly being called upon to defend their right to exist is a mechanism of power.
>
> *(Ahmed 2015)*

Inclusive Language

Part of the issue of 'freedom of speech', apart from the views being aired and those doing the speaking, represents the problematic power structures of language itself. Making languages 'safer' by encouraging the use of inclusive terms and by identifying and 'calling out' slurs and discriminatory language has long been a part of radical politics. As language expresses how we perceive the world around us and communicate with one another, it is a powerful tool for members of radical political movements. The transformation of language often takes place when changes of practice adopted by small groups are disseminated into the wider world through repetition, media and other communicative practices (see Cameron 1990; McKenzie-Mohr 2014).

What happens to language once it becomes more widely spread is never certain: 'Once new vocabulary takes hold beyond its movement – which is, after all, the intention – it is taken up and activated by those with varying goals and interests and it is often reshaped as it is used more widely' (Devault 2014: 24). Changes in practice that become helpful to marginalised groups, such as the adoption of gender-neutral phrases, or the removal from everyday language of racist slurs – to name just two examples – still operate within existing social relations. Thus, there is no real control over how the initial disruption and transformation will be used – it may not achieve its original aims.

It is also important to remember the varying social and cultural contexts in which language has played a part and the contestations that result from deliberate disruptions. In recent years, the phrase 'person (or people) of colour' (POC) has become increasingly widespread as a catch-all term for people from a range of ethnic backgrounds. In the USA, this term has become widely adopted in radical politics, first spread online before becoming commonplace in the media and other cultural outlets. In the UK, there has been a mixed response to the term. Indeed, in the latter part of the twentieth century, a lot of work was done in public discourse to alter the language used to talk about ethnicity. The term 'coloured' was denounced for its insensitive othering and the homogenisation of different minority ethnicities under an unhelpful blanket term. In its place, it became much more commonplace to refer to somebody as 'black', 'white', 'Asian' or 'mixed-race' (although these categories, too, are highly reductive and imprecise as well as excluding a range of identities that do not fit neatly into them). Other terms emerged in public discourse to deal with diversity: 'ethnic minorities' and, more recently 'BME/BAME' (black and minority ethnic). Certainly, in discourse produced by UK businesses, large organisations and governments, these terms are far more prevalent than 'POC' or its variants. We could make a similar point about the use of 'handicapped'. In the USA, this is used in everyday life to refer to people with disabilities; yet, it is deemed offensive in the UK. So we must be mindful that when we are using language that is seen to be inclusive or acceptable in one culture, it may not always travel well.

Trigger warnings

The third of the most frequently debated aspects of safer spaces in recent years has been the phenomenon of 'trigger warnings' or 'content notes' – a system of providing warnings for content that might be deemed 'triggering' in different ways. The process of 'triggering' refers to something that might enact a response in trauma sufferers, such as panic attacks, flashbacks or other unwanted symptoms, although its critics tend to characterise the term as also encompassing hurt, offence or anger (Halberstam 2014; Lukianoff and Haidt 2015).

TWs are commonplace on many parts of the Internet, including blogs, Tumblr, feminist and LGBTQ+ sites and fan fiction archives, where content may be prefigured with a list of TWs (e.g. for rape, violence, racist slurs). Content can also be tagged in some platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter or Tumblr allowing users either to actively search out that content or blacklist it (e.g. tags such as #edchat which deal with conversations around eating disorders).

Not all online environments use TWs, of course. However, many outlets offer other clues as to the content of their articles. *Jezebel*, for example, does not use TWs, but 'our headlines and intro text are meant to clearly convey where the content of each post is heading' (Jessica Coen in Moore, 2014). The reason TWs have become part of a wider media debate, however, is primarily due to stories about their use (or lack of) in education.

The use of TWs has been criticised for infantalising students, giving them an excuse to avoid complicated subjects: much of this criticism refers specifically to using TWs for literature or art (even though 'trigger warnings' are widely accepted when applied to film, TV and video games, suggesting a perception of 'harm' that is different when applied to 'high' culture as opposed to 'popular' culture).

In the safer-space workshops, there was a range of practice in this area. One queer activism group used signs in venues detailing both their inclusion policy and 'warnings' for the kind of topics that would be discussed at their events (in a similar way to warnings for strobe lighting in concert venues). A blogger listed TWs before their posts and always provided a 'more' button so that users had to actively click through to read the article rather than coming across potentially triggering content. One psychology lecturer told students at the start of term when they would be discussing topics such as rape, mental health, etc., so that students could be prepared and were told that if the issue was 'live' for them, they had freedom to either not attend that week or leave if needed. A film studies tutor offered statements in module handbooks about which films on the module contained sensitive or potentially upsetting material. A secondary school teacher did not use TWs but did set parameters with their class on how students would treat each other and handle talking about difficult issues at the start of the academic year.

Participants discussed the complexity of personal triggers – at one event, a wall of post-its revealed dozens of potential triggers from the obvious ones such as rape to perhaps more unusual ones including seeing people eat meat. There were discussions about potential options – databases of TWs that users could look up before reading a book or attending an event; only providing warnings for common triggers such as rape/sexual assault, racism or mental health issues; giving informal warnings but without labelling them as a 'trigger warning' per se.

Others do not have a specific policy themselves, but allow students or group members to create their own position on warnings: 'I've never required student writers to use trigger warnings, but I've kept the space open for them to respect the requests of their classmates … a sizable number were very excited to have the conversation, something they reported had been mocked by other creative writing professors' (Lawlor in Milks 2014).

Of course, what is really at stake when it comes to establishing safer-space culture is not whether or not TWs are adopted – or any other specific practice. The issue is about to what extent communities and groups are inclusive, which almost always relates to the way power operates within such groups. For groups to be truly radical, they need to create a culture that celebrates, includes and listens to the most marginalised members of that group and that ultimately prioritises *people* over principles.

Ruth A. Deller

Safer Spaces in an Unsafe World

As I have discussed, there is a lot of hostility to 'safer space' practices. However, asking people to simply accept that 'life is triggering' and criticising those who 'take offence', protest against injustice or challenge oppressive and discriminatory aspects of culture simply seeks to undermine their voices and agency. Such rhetoric only serves to reinforce a message of conforming to the status quo and accepting the inequalities of life. As Liv Little, editor-in-chief of online magazine *gal-dem*, puts it,

> I don't get what they want to happen. Do they want people to be quiet and suck it up? Do they want people to have breakdowns and be really unhappy and accept a political system that doesn't represent them?… A lot of offensive stuff is happening. Why should people not be offended? People are offended but they're using that feeling of being offended to bring about change. Things are so dire sometimes that it's necessary. If I want to carve out a safe space, why shouldn't I?'
>
> *(In Nicholson 2016)*

Arguments made against safe spaces all too often delegitimise the voices of the people that need those spaces. Asking people to simply 'grow up' and 'get over themselves' reduces their experience to something that is trivial, childish or inconsequential. Often those who use the argument of free speech do not understand that speech is rarely free – and that platforms and power are not available equally to all. Many of those clamouring for safer spaces are simply searching for a space in which they can be seen and heard. When their experiences, sensitivities, traumas and identities are not only questioned, but rejected, their voices become harder and harder to hear. Wrongly accused by the power of controlling the parameters of communication, they become (or remain) controlled, subdued and disempowered.

Those seeking 'safer space' are often dismissed as demanding, oversensitive or 'special snowflakes' (Nicholson 2016) afraid of life. However, as Roxanne Gay points out, those who make these criticisms often are those 'who are able to take safety for granted' (2015). Of course, the irony is that critics of such practices often act even more offended and hurt, such as the famous example of President Donald Trump complaining on Twitter after Mike Pence was booed during a performance of *Hamilton* that 'The Theater must always be a safe and special place. The cast of Hamilton was very rude last night to a very good man, Mike Pence. Apologize!' (Trump, cited in Nagesh 2016).

This example may demonstrate that emotions run high on both 'sides' of these debates. At one workshop focused specifically on higher education and safer spaces, I was in a peer group discussing the Germaine Greer Cardiff example mentioned earlier in this chapter. This peer group comprised a mixture of genders, ages and races, but we all shared the view that we would be uncomfortable with inviting Greer to speak on topics relating to gender and sexual identity, particularly where it was likely to make a significant number of the students feel uncomfortable. We thought that it would be wise to consult with students first and either to not invite Greer at all, or to ensure her position was countered. To us, it seemed a similar situation to inviting Nick Griffin (the former British National Party leader) to a debate on immigration or race.

However, the moderator of the session – a woman whose political and academic life had coincided largely with the second-wave feminist movement – became quite agitated and upset when talking to us about the situation and our perspective on it. She did not agree that students' opinions should be taken into account here because of a combination of the

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importance of the issues at hand and the status of Greer. Interestingly, she had not been this strident when it came to discussing TWs, sexism or other aspects of safer spaces earlier in the session – it was clearly this particular debate that struck a raw nerve for her. For this woman, a lot was at stake emotionally. Reflecting on it later, it seemed to me like much of this emotion came from the fear that the battles won by the second feminist movement and the influence of Greer and her contemporaries at that time could be lost or forgotten amidst the controversy around Greer's more recent statements around transidentity.

This example illustrated starkly to me that what is at stake is not a matter of intellectual debate. Were that the case, both second-wave feminists and student protesters would no doubt realise that they share a desire to challenge the idea of binary gender norms and essentialist ideas about masculinity and femininity – and may well mutually conclude that it is possible to do this while also supporting the rights and experiences of trans and non-binary individuals. But it is not about that – is about the *affective experience* of power, access and inclusion. The students in Cardiff protested Greer because her statements deny the existence of transpeople and affording her a platform gives her power and could be seen to reinforce her views. For my colleague, the issue was also exclusion – protests against Greer were felt as a rejection of her generation of activists.

Just as in the example of the clash between the middle-aged gay man and the younger female and non-binary individuals mentioned earlier in the chapter, both 'sides' bring with them a plethora of felt experiences of hurt, inequality and struggle. Both groups have wrestled with powerlessness – and when they perceive a threat to what little power they do have, this causes an affective response. Indeed, this is true of most situations discussed in this chapter. Those who seek to retain statues of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford are as motivated by affect as the members of RMF: there may be affective ties to the past, perhaps, or maybe to architectural aesthetics. But the biggest issue at stake here is, of course, power. When activists attempt to claim safe space for themselves, be that through taking over a room, marching through a city or calling for a statue to be removed, they are threatening the status of those in power – and the powerful will have an emotional response.

Safer spaces, as with most aspects of radical politics, cannot be discussed merely as a matter of intellectual reasoning – these things matter to people because they have an impact on our physical, emotional and mental well-being and are often embedded within the cultural, legal and societal frameworks that govern all our lives. Without understanding each other's lived experience, we cannot meaningfully effect change. As Paulo Freire puts it:

> revolutionary leaders commit many errors and miscalculations by not taking into account something so real as the people's view of the world: a view which explicitly and implicitly contains their concerns, their doubts, their hopes, their way of seeing the leaders, their perceptions of themselves and of the oppressors, their religious beliefs (almost always syncretic), their fatalism, their rebellious reactions.

> *(2000: 182)*

I am not saying that people's hurts and fears justify their behaviours and attitudes. However, it is only through remembering both our humanity and that of the people or groups we may be in dispute with that we can ever possibly hope to achieve change. Let us take heed of Freire's reminder that, in order for our struggles to have meaning:

> the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity, becoming turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both … Who are better

prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?… Who can better understand the necessity of liberation?

(2000: 45)

Even within radical groups, there can be dissent and members can hurt one another. The history of feminism, for example, is littered with heartbreaking examples of racism and transphobia. No safer-space policy is perfect. We will cause distress – what matters is our commitment to one another and to changing our practices and attitudes where necessary. Truitt argues that the term 'accountable space' may sometimes be more helpful:

> Accountability means being responsible to oneself and each other for our own words. It means entering a space with good intentions but understanding that we all screw up and need to accept responsibility for our mistakes. It means being open to being called out. It means acknowledging when others are triggered and when we feel pain and working to learn and grow from this experience. And it requires something incredibly difficult, a trust in those we share a space with that their intentions are good, that they mean well just like we do, that we are all in a process of learning and growing and that making mistakes is part of how this happens.

(Truitt 2009)

To create a truly radical politics means caring for one another – and it also means looking after ourselves. The work of social justice can be emotionally and physically draining and we will inevitably get knocked and bruised along the way. Therefore, we must remember Lorde's assertion that 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare' (1988: 131). Keeping ourselves safe will help strengthen us to protect, and advocate for, others. Meg-John Barker, in a helpful comic dedicated to self-care, lists mantras we should speak to ourselves, including:

• Looking after myself means that I survive in a world that doesn't want people like me to survive.
• Caring for myself demonstrates that people like me are valuable even if we are being treated as though we were disposable.
• Self-care gives me the energy to resist (2017: 4).

Ultimately, to create a truly safe space is to become skilled at radical care, radical kindness and radical love – of oneself, of one another and of the world which we live in: 'And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors' violence' (Freire 2000:45).

What is really at stake here, of course, is the cultivation of communities that are inclusive and supportive – that equip people to fight for their place in the wider world, to seek justice and enact change. Things like TWs, no platforming and diversity policies are merely mechanisms that can be utilised within communities to enact their principles in practice. Inevitably, we will cause one another harm in some way, whether intentional or not. As Harris helpfully reminds us, 'There's virtually no way to create a room of two people that doesn't include the reproduction of some unequal power relation, but there's also no way to engage in politics by yourself' (2015). Creating a supportive culture is far more important than which techniques are utilised in that creation. What is central is that everyone wants to feel that they matter; that they can be heard; that they can have some power to impact the world around them.

Notes

1 None of these events were recorded onto audio or video and so I discuss these examples by referring to things that were discussed in the sessions and to notes made by myself, my co-organisers and participants themselves during each event (for example, there were a number of exercises in which participants wrote things on post-its or flip charts), but I am unable to provide verbatim quotes from individuals.

2 It is worth noting that the issues around safer spaces are not only debated differently in different outlets (as one might expect, given the age and political leanings of different audiences), but that media coverage also differs according to country. In addition, this is not an issue we can easily frame in terms of left/right or liberal/conservative. For example, in the USA, much of the antagonistic discourse comes from right leaning movements, including the so-called 'alt right', whilst in the UK, both left- and right-wing commenters have been notably critical of some safer-space practices.

3 Of course, whilst there is insufficient room in this chapter to cover this area, environmental concern and practices to conserve the planet represent another form of enacting safer space.

4 As this volume went to press, in August 2017, the issue of statues in public spaces made the news once more. Following the decision to remove a statue of Confederate army general Robert E Lee from a park in Charlottesville, Virginia, a protest against the decision by a group of far right activists calling themselves 'Unite the Right' made news worldwide as a protestor drove a vehicle into a group of anti-fascist demonstrators, killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring nineteen others.

5 It is also worth noting that practices ostensibly designed to make spaces safe from violence, such as security checking for weapons and explosives, have all too often been used as excuses for racial profiling, discrimination and unlawful arrests, violence and even killings – as the Black Lives Matter movement (among others) emphasises. As Hanhardt puts it, 'The increased attention paid to security has revealed the disparate understandings of threat held among those considered representative of and those marginal to the national body politic' (2008: 62).

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