MORAL PERFECTIONISM IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE WORK:



Cultivating Compassion with Colleagues

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WHAT IS MORAL PERFECTIONISM?

A philosophical and ethical framework focused on striving for continual self-improvement and moral integrity

Specific focus on around how we relate to our self and others

Simply put – feeling like you always have to do the ‘right’ thing and never make a mistake. High moral standards.

WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT IT?

Moral perfectionism often shows up in helping professions, where people feel a deep responsibility to do no harm – but that can turn into judgment, shame, and burnout when they inevitably make mistakes or can't meet every need.

High stakes and high impact work.
There is a real reality that things can go wrong and impact people who are most vulnerable.

Impact our relationships with ourselves, our colleagues and our participants.

(Kinman., et al., 2022)

MORAL SHAME

- Deep emotional experience of feeling that one has failed to live up to their own or others moral expectations or standards.
- More than just making a mistake but feeling like you're a bad person or underqualified/incompetent because of that mistake.
- Triggered by real or perceived judgement

What Can it look like?

- Feeling pressure to always be emotionally available, insightful and competent
- Internal script: "I'm not doing enough" "I'm not good enough"
- Feeling personally responsible for systemic failures and outcomes

"Shame thrives in silence and secrecy; it disconnects people" – Brene Brown

(Piotrowski, et al., 2023)

Moral Shame with participants

Working With Victim-Survivors:

- Feeling inadequate when we can't 'save' or 'protect' someone
  → Inhibits the ability to be present with victim survivors without needing to fix or rescue
- Feeling shame when we freeze, react or burn out
- Guilt when feeling emotionally numb or over-involved
- When we feel like we've said the wrong thing or missed something
- Feeling at fault for why a woman did not want support or when they return to PUV

Working With Person Using Violence:

- Feeling of inadequacy when we make a mistake in group (e.g., challenge too hard or not enough)
- Pressure to have the answers and perfect response
- Shame when we feel we didn't support our co-facilitator enough
- Shame when we miss something that involves WA information
- Irrational fear of being exposed

Moral Shame with Colleagues

- Fear of being seen as unskilled or unethical
- Feeling not good enough as a worker or team member → outside in the team
- Holding back in meetings or group discussions
- Avoiding supervision or reflective practice
- Becoming defensive when receiving feedback – "feedback means I've failed as a worker"
- Hyper focused on language or minor mistakes – overexplaining



Impacts of Moral Shame

- Compassion fatigue
- Insecurity
- **Withdrawal**
- **Feeling incompetent**
- Moral Injury
- Burnout
- Hopelessness
- Feelings of failure
- Harsh inner criticism
- Loss of confidence
- Anxiety
- Depression
- **Trauma activation**
- Rigid thinking
- Overcompensation
- Missed opportunities to learn or grow
- Rumination instead of reflection
- Relationships with ourselves, participants, colleagues and organisation, especially around **disconnection and feelings of not belonging.**

MORAL JUDGEMENT

- Moral judgement is the act of evaluating someone's actions, decisions or character based on moral or ethical standards
- Moral judgement can feel like accountability, but without compassion or curiosity, it becomes punitive – and that damages people, teams and practice
- Often subtle or unconscious
- Moral Superiority

What Can it look like?

- Criticising colleagues for how they manage risk, boundaries they set, work styles etc.
- Tone or Language policing
- Exclusion or badmouthing

"We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are." – Anais Nin

Moral Judgement with Participants

Working With Victim-Survivors:

- Judging women for staying with the PUV, especially despite children or child safety involvement.
  - "You need to put your children first"
- Critising her coping mechanism
  - E.g., alcohol and drug use
- Withholding support because a client "is not doing the work"
- Judging women for not going through with the support given/ being inconsistent with what they are wanting

Working With Person Using Violence:

- Labelling men in group as all beyond change and all image management
- Forgetting structural, cultural or trauma informed lenses in moments of pressure
- Discrediting any trauma history or maladaptive coping mechanism
- Patronising language
- Assuming resistance = unwillingness.

Moral Judgement with Colleagues

Working With Victim-Survivors:

- Any sign of supporting the man is collusive and anti-feminist
- Assuming that your colleague does not care about victim survivors
- Implying weakness on WA workers for becoming emotionally involved.
  - Labelling care and connection as over involvement
  - "That's not how I would have handled it"

Working With Person Using Violence:

- Moral judgement of colleagues for not being 'trauma informed enough" or not "doing it right"
- Moral Superiority:
  - "I know best as…
    - The man
    - The female facilitator
    - The senior facilitator
- Projecting standards/styles onto our co-facilitator: (weaponized against others)
  - "They're too soft", "They dominate the room", "They're unprofessional", I would never say that"

Impacts of Moral Judgement

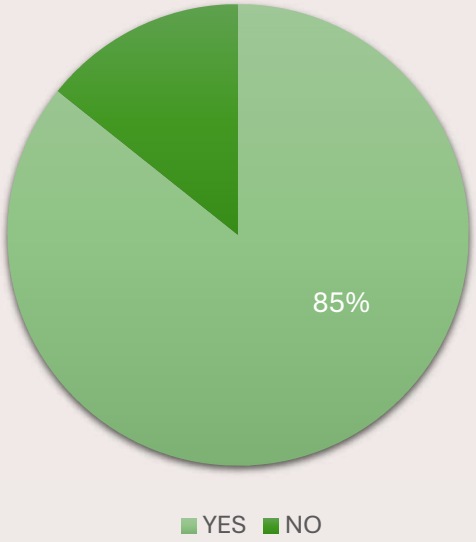
- Gossiping
- **Moral Superiority** - Feeling moral superior over colleague or clients
- Blame culture
- Can lead to stigma, exclusion/isolation or loss of compassion
- Over functioning – carrying too much of the session
- **Scorekeeping – resentment and disconnection to your co-facilitator**
- Lead to silent resentment and lack of open feedback
- Undermines nonviolence, accountability and trust
- Moral Injury

Organisationally

- Perfectionist ideals seep into workplace dynamics
- Staff judge themselves and other harshly
- Team environments become emotionally unsafe and punitive
- Unrealistic expectations of performance

MICRO STUDY

Experienced Moral Shame



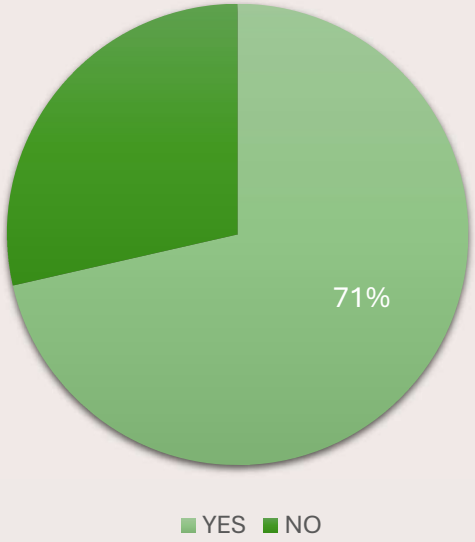
- 85% experience moral shame

Experienced Moral Judgement



- 100% experience moral judgement

Been Morally Judgmental



- 71% had been morally judgmental

Thematic Analysis shows 6 Key Findings:

1. ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Toxic Positivity and the Harm

- *"We want to present the glitz and the glam and hide all the negativity"*
- *"I don't think there is a culture of really talking about what is not so good"*
- *"Holding secrets in this work is dangerous"*
- *"Moral perfectionism was how I survived a workplace that only acknowledged the success stories"*
- "Organisations do their own image management"
- "It's exhausting managing the pressure, and lonely."

Impacts

- Fear of speaking up/making mistakes / Self-silencing
- Moral perfectionism, shame and judgement
- Workers feel guilt for struggling in a system that praises resilience over rest
- Lived experience is sanitised (Staff with trauma feel pressure to be "inspirational" rather than real)
- Unsure what to do when you do make a mistake **– Moral perfectionism as a survival tool**

2. JUDGEMENT, SHAME & FEAR OF SPEAKING UP

Fear of Getting it Wrong and/or Being Judged

- → *"I'm often hesitate to say more out of fear that I'll say the wrong thing"*
- → *"You don't know whether they are looking at you through curiosity or critique [co-facilitation]"*
- →*"They were hypercritical of me"*
- →*"I became hyper vigilant in group, so worried about every word I used and how it could be taken out of context"*
- → *[When women declined support] I reflect "What if I had said something differently and they would have engaged?"*
- →*"I tend not to contribute because I don't want to be attacked"*
- → *"Consistent nervousness about saying the wrong thing."*
- → *"You're almost deemed incompetent"*
- → *"It was embarrassing, I definitely felt shame and underqualified for not knowing"*

3. CO-FACILITATION DYNAMICS AND INEQUALITY

Hierarchy and Moral Superiority	Feeling silenced or dismissed because they are a senior facilitator • *"They were my senior, so even though I disagree, I felt that I couldn't question what they said"* Moral superiority as the senior facilitator (More experience and knowledge) • *"Unrecognised sense of superiority is a real issue because it doesn't provide a sense of safety to give feedback to that person"* • *"To them, every other method was inferior"* • *"There was no curiosity…it was like they knew best."*
	Assumptions on inexperience. Less trust from older or more experienced colleagues.
Identity and Reverse Privilege (e.g., gender, sexuality, race, trauma etc)	The pressure and higher standards to be a good male role model of change • *"I am a stranger in the nest"* • *"I felt like I was put under the spotlight"* • *"I do have a responsibility for how I present myself as man in this space"*
	"They judged me because I was a hetero cis white woman." "They assumed I didn't have any life experience and judged me for that."
Role Expectations	• "[Co-facilitator] did no prep work…I judged her" • "My co-facilitator didn't contribute equally so when the participant escalated, I felt the sole responsibility to address that"

4.RELATIONAL SAFETY

Importance of Feedback Styles

- Constructive and warm feedback → **Focus on tone, intention, relational safety and repair**

- Reflective Window of Tolerance
    - "My reflective window is narrow right now – can we revisit this when I'm more resourced"
    - "I can sometimes struggle with harsh self criticism and due to that, I best receive feedback when…"
    - "Can we explore what was happening in that moment for the both of us?"

- *"I never felt judged by them…they are open to listening to my decision-making before giving their opinion"*
- *"Everybody is open – it's not like you ever get shut down"*
- *"She is the senior facilitator in the room, but we have such a collaborative and respectful relationship that dialogue is very possible…even if we disagree"*
- *"We are connected as a team and there is space to have difficult conversations."*

5. IMPORTANCE OF SUPERVISION & SUPPORT

Lack of Supervision and Clarity

- *"I walk into that environment and feel stupid"*
- *"I feel like I completely let this woman down"*
- "If I'm working outside of my capacity, and I can't talk to somebody about it and know I'll get support, then I'm actually a huge risk to everybody I'm working with."
- *"I felt that there hasn't been space to learn or grow – it was like 'you should just know it'*

Due to a lack of support, perfectionism was used as a survival tool

- Protective factor/coping mechanism to lack of support and toxic positivity.
- *"I felt isolated in my work, so if I made a mistake, it was purely my fault"*
- *"You're the one holding this ball of responsibility, and if you drop it, it's on you"*
- *"I think that's a very big downfall of the organisation [holding the risk]"*

Supervision to Resolve Conflict and ensure safety

- "If I had consistent supervision, it would have eased the tension between us."
- *"In absence of supervision, I didn't know how to address it and still work together – Was this going to benefit or destroy the [co-facilitation] relation?"*

6. MORAL INJURY AND DILEMMAS

→ Failure to prevent harm or take necessary action when one's morals dictate otherwise
→ Observing behaviours that conflict with your moral (e.g., co-facilitator)
→ Betrayal by leaders, organisation or co-facilitator/ Unable to provide care due to organisational/system failures

" I've been trying to advocate for her, and I feel like I'm not getting anywhere [system failure]

"I still don't have an answer for this woman" [organisational failure]

"I felt that I was observing things that were happening in that room that were harmful" [co-facilitation]

"I liked them as a person, but I was seeing them cause harm"

"I get defensive and resistant, because it feels wrong what is happening."

THE COUNTERFORCE: CULTIVATING COMPASSION

CONVENTIONAL COMPASSION VS RADICAL COMPASSION

Conventional Compassion	**Radical Compassion**
Feels sympathy for "deserving" people	Extends care to people who have caused harm
Avoids complexity	Embraces contradiction and nuance
Reinforces binaries (good/bad)	Challenges binary thinking
Based on **emotion**	Based on commitment and **practice**
Maintains status quo	Disrupts oppressive systems
Stays safe and comfortable	Risks vulnerability and discomfort

- We want to strive to practice radical compassion, not just feel compassionate.
- Radical compassion is the practice of extending compassion not just when it's easy or convenient, but also when it's difficult — toward people who have caused harm, toward ourselves in moments of shame or failure, and even toward those we strongly disagree with.
- Compassion with accountability, boundaries and inclusivity is radical

Shifting Culture with Compassion

Radical self-compassion as a practice:

- Explore the complex and sometimes contradicting feelings that arise in this work without judgement
- Recognize your limits and say 'no' without over explaining or self blame
- Self reflection instead of self critiquing and shame
  - *"I notice I'm being really critical of myself right now, what's that about"*
  - Radical self compassion often involves naming and resisting unrealistic standards

Curriculum interventions focused on moral perfectionism and standardized self compassion programs

- Normalise talking about moral perfectionism, shame and judgement – Make this visible
  - → Develop "What went wrong" Learning spaces. Normalises 'getting it wrong'
  - → Encourage staff to say "I didn't get that right" without fear
- Learn who you are working with
  - → Develop shared agreement around feedback styles, conflict resolution, repair
  - → Explore their own struggles with moral perfectionism, superiority, insecurities etc.
- Embrace a learning stance as a team culture
  - → Shift from punitive to growth-orientated feedback
- **Promote compassion-led leadership that models accountability, differences and imperfection**
- Develop shared agreement around feedback styles, conflict resolution, and repair



Compassion without accountability is enabling. Accountability without compassion is punitive. The goal is to hold both – nonviolent, curious accountability.

REFLECTIONS

Moral perfectionism is a shared and silent struggle in DV work and in our organisations

It harms our connection to ourselves, our teams and the people we support

Compassion, curiosity and connection are powerful antidotes

We don’t need to be perfect to be impactful – we need to be present, accountable and human

THANK YOU

QUESTIONS?

