

Trigger Warnings in Psychology Classes: What Do Students Think?

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Sensitive topics are an inherent part of psychology education, but some college students have begun to demand prior notification before the coverage of potentially disturbing content. This call from students for “trigger warnings” has been controversial among faculty, and no research has documented psychology students’ perspectives on the topic. In order to fill this gap in knowledge, we collected data from six different psychology departments across the United States. Undergraduate psychology students ($N = 751$) reported their attitudes toward, and experiences with, trigger warnings in the psychology classroom. Results indicated that many psychology students held favorable views about the use of trigger warnings, viewing such warnings as necessary for topics such as sexual assault, child abuse, and suicide. Despite this, the overwhelming majority of psychology students reported little discomfort with discussing sensitive topics in class and indicated that any discomfort they felt had little or no effect on their learning. Most psychology students also agreed that potentially distressing topics have an appropriate role in the pedagogy of psychological science; that students should expect to encounter potentially disturbing content during psychology classes; and that experienced distress does not warrant student avoidance of sensitive topics. The implications of our findings for teaching are that relatively few students report the type of distress that trigger warnings are intended to prevent, but students are generally supportive should teachers choose to provide trigger warnings. However, these implications may not generalize across all types of students or institutions of higher learning.

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According to an American Psychological Association *Monitor* article (K. Smith, 2014) as well as a recent *APA Journals Article Spotlight* article (American Psychological Association, 2017), college students are placing increasingly intense pressure on their instructors to provide “trigger warnings” before covering potentially sensitive topics in the classroom. These warnings are supposed to allow students to psychologically prepare themselves for topics that might cause them distress. Many commonplace topics within the field of psychology (e.g., aggression, suicide, sexual assault) might be considered sensitive enough by students to warrant such warnings, but researchers have not yet documented psychology students’ attitudes toward these topics or how instructors have handled these topics in the classroom. In the absence of data, instructors have no evidence by which to judge potential student distress, the effects of such distress on student learning, or the appropriateness of providing warnings. This evidence is needed to evaluate student requests to routinely provide trigger warnings in college classrooms. In addition, any mandate to routinely incorporate trigger warnings into higher education pedagogy has been cast as a threat to academic freedom and as potentially detrimental to students (The American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2014). Therefore, the need for research in this area is strong, and the purpose of our study was to document psychology students’ perceptions of trigger warnings in order to help instructors make informed decisions about use of them in the classroom.

What Is a Trigger Warning?

People outside of psychology have defined trigger warnings in a variety of ways. The news media have portrayed trigger warnings as preparing people for an experience of general offense, distress, or discomfort before exposure to socially or psychologically difficult topics (Medina, 2014; Vingiano, 2014). Specific to education, the National Coalition Against Censorship (2015) defined trigger warnings as “warnings to

alert students in advance that material assigned in a course might be upsetting or offensive,” and the AAUP (2014) defined them as “warnings in advance if assigned material contains anything that might trigger difficult emotional responses for students” (para. 1). These definitions extend far from the original psychological concept behind trigger warnings, which pertained to the avoidance of clinically related distress attached to traumatic experiences (see Boyesen, 2017, for a full discussion). Therefore, a definition based on the original clinical intention behind such warnings may help to guide discussion about the topic.

A more precise definition of trigger warnings is the “prior notification of an educational topic so that students may prepare for or avoid distress that is automatically evoked by that topic, due to clinical mental health problems” (Boyesen, 2017, p. 164). This definition acknowledges that the function of trigger warnings is to avoid automatically evoked distress experienced in the wake of formally diagnosed clinical disorders, such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), rather than distress reactions elicited by a classroom discussion of difficult topics. However, the appropriateness and effectiveness of trigger warnings in college classrooms, even for clinically relevant distress, remains an ongoing source of debate (Wyatt, 2016).

The Emergence of the Debate

Although clinical symptoms of PTSD serve as the origin for trigger warnings, over the last several decades, a public norm has emerged within general communication and social media domains (e.g., TV, films, Internet sites, discussion boards, blogs, Twitter) to precede any potentially disturbing material with a warning about content (Kim, 1994; Knox, 2017; Vingiano, 2014). In particular, feminist blogs and websites have been highly influential in terms of setting the norm for providing content advisories when discussing or presenting information related to violence against women (Knox, 2017; Marcotte, 2013; Medina, 2014). Eventually, so-

cial media users coopted the term “trigger warning” for such advisories from the PTSD-related concept of automatically triggered distress in response to trauma reminders. As use of trigger warnings became more widespread, the trend and expectation took hold on college campuses.

The debate about trigger warnings on college campuses accelerated after the news media began covering isolated efforts by students to formalize the use of trigger warnings in classrooms at institutions such as University of California at Santa Barbara, Rutgers University, and Oberlin College (Medina, 2014; K. Smith, 2014). Subsequently, *The New York Times* began covering the controversy (see Downes, 2016; Feldman-Barrett, 2017; Manne, 2015), and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published numerous commentaries on the issue (e.g., Essig, 2014; Leiter, 2016). In response to this national attention, the AAUP (2014) strongly denounced student demands for trigger warnings in higher education, referring to them as “infantilizing and anti-intellectual” and a “threat to academic freedom” (para. 3, 1). The past few years have seen a polemic debate of this issue that has yet to be resolved (see Knox, 2017).

Proponents of trigger warnings offer several arguments for their positive effects on students. A key argument concerns the potential for trigger warnings to serve as a legitimate accommodation for disability as described under federal law (Carter, 2015; Manne, 2015; Wyatt, 2016), whereby offering students advance awareness about course content in the form of trigger warnings is seen as consistent with the accommodations typically offered to students with other forms of psychiatric disability (Americans with Disabilities Act [1990]; Doll, 2017; Salzer, Wick, & Rogers, 2008). Supporters also point out that trigger warnings are a form of advocacy for people with disabilities because they are an expression of faculty respect and inclusiveness (Carter, 2015; Wyatt, 2016). Trigger warnings may also allow students to make informed decisions about exposing themselves to potentially distressing course content and foster instructors’ responsible discussion of potentially traumatic content (Godderis & Root, 2016).

Countering these arguments, critics assert that the use of trigger warnings may have unintended negative consequences. These concerns involve social, professional, and practical elements. Social concerns include the worry that trig-

ger warnings encourage students to identify as victims who must be protected, and that warnings will discourage learning about difficult topics and diverse viewpoints (AAUP, 2014; Wyatt, 2016). Another criticism is that some predominant topics singled out for trigger warnings are aimed more at women than men (e.g., sexual assault), and this makes such warnings a form of benevolent sexism based on the assumption that women need protection (Doll, 2017). Trigger warnings are also often criticized in tandem with perceived efforts to establish environments of “political correctness” on college campuses. As such, critics see trigger warnings as primarily a political action that is inappropriate for widespread implementation in college classrooms (Wyatt, 2016).

As to professional concerns, the AAUP (2014) asserted that the routine issuance of trigger warnings is inconsistent with the role of instructors in administering accommodations for disability. Specifically, administrators of disability resource offices handle documentation of disabilities and decisions about who requires an accommodation, and the role of instructors is to implement accommodations for individual students in a way that does not alter fundamental learning goals or educational standards. An associated practical concern is the difficulty with providing warnings about all topics that could possibly elicit student distress (Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015; Wyatt, 2016). This is especially true in that triggers of distress in cases of PTSD can be associated with all types of experiences or sensations that may be unrelated to the trauma itself (Ehlers, 2010; Ehlers, Hackmann, & Michael, 2004; Hackmann, Ehlers, Speckens, & Clark, 2004; Kleim, Graham, Bryant, & Ehlers, 2013).

Findings from the clinical literature cast further doubt on the practical utility of trigger warnings (Boysen, 2017). Trigger warnings may be unproductive because their use encourages the *avoidance* of distressing stimuli, and this avoidance behavior is linked to the development, not the prevention, of PTSD symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kumpulainen, Orcutt, Bardeen, & Varkovitzky, 2011; Polusny et al., 2011; Reddy, Pickett, & Orcutt, 2006). Avoidance behavior is also contraindicated in most standard treatment procedures for PTSD (Ursano et al., 2010). Thus, trigger warnings may reduce short-term distress for students

while inadvertently increasing their long-term distress. Hence, critics argue that mental health treatment and individual accommodations are more appropriate than a blanket policy requiring the routine use of trigger warnings by faculty (AAUP, 2014; Boyesen, Wells, & Dawson, 2016). Although strong arguments can be made both for and against the use of trigger warnings, to date, the debate about their legitimacy has focused largely on rhetoric rather than data.

Empirical Research on Trigger Warnings

Only two empirical studies have emerged on the use of trigger warnings in college classrooms. The National Coalition Against Censorship (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2015) reported on an informal, non-peer-reviewed survey of over 800 faculty members from the Modern Language Association and the College Art Association. Key findings from this survey indicated that a strong minority (45%) of faculty believed that trigger warnings would or could have a negative effect on “classroom dynamics,” and only a small portion of the sample held a favorable view toward trigger warnings (17%). Although more than half of the sample reported having issued some announcement in classes that course content to be covered might be distressing (with 23% indicating they did so several times or regularly), in open-ended comments, several faculty distinguished between warning students about specific elements of course content, versus using syllabi or a detailed course description to inform students about the type of content to be covered in the course. Finally, the survey results indicated that although most faculty care deeply about the well-being of students, most disagreed that policy or institutional administrators should require routine use of trigger warnings.

The single refereed empirical study on trigger warnings consisted of a survey of abnormal psychology instructors (Boyesen, Wells, & Dawson, 2016), a particularly pertinent sample because abnormal psychology instructors not only have knowledge about mental health issues, but also cover a number of potentially distressing topics as part of the standard content in the course (e.g., suicide, trauma, child abuse). Findings from this study indicated that 31% of instructors had used trigger warnings, 49% had not used trigger warnings, and 20% were unfa-

miliar with the term. Depending on the topic, anywhere from 32% to 54% of instructors had never issued trigger warnings to their students. However, a majority of instructors had offered warnings at some point about suicide (68%) and other traumatic experiences (67%). In addition, a strong minority of instructors held negative opinions about issuing trigger warnings (44%), and (25%) believed that such warnings were harmful to students’ mental health. Although these two existing studies provide some indication of how instructors in different disciplines view trigger warnings, information from the perspective of students has yet to emerge.

The Current Research

We sought to provide the first empirical documentation of undergraduate psychology students’ perceptions of trigger warnings. Our survey assessed students’ attitudes about trigger warnings using a broad sample of potentially sensitive topics that might be covered in any psychology course. Students rated how distressing the topics were to them, and if their distress affected their learning. As certain demographic groups may experience discomfort when dealing with topics relevant to their personal identity or that emphasize a culturally different status (cf. Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014; Hughey, Rees, Goss, Rosino, & Lesser, 2017; Woodford, Howell, Kulick, & Silverschanz, 2013), we also explored the relation between demographic characteristics that were a part of students’ personal identities and their perceptions of trigger warnings.

Specifically, we addressed the following exploratory research questions to establish a baseline of knowledge and to guide future research:

1. To what degree do psychology students report discomfort in reaction to the coverage of potentially sensitive topics?
2. What are psychology students’ perceptions regarding the necessity of trigger warnings for potentially sensitive topics?
3. To what degree do students perceive experienced distress related to the coverage of sensitive topics as interfering with their learning?
4. Are specific demographic variables related to student discomfort about sensitive topics?

The answers to these questions will help instructors of psychology to make evidence-based

decisions about issuing trigger warnings during the coverage of potentially sensitive topics in the classroom.

Method

Participants

Sampling procedure. During spring, 2017, we used a multisite sampling procedure, collecting data from six different undergraduate psychology departments located in the Northeast, Southeast, South, Midwest, Northwest, and Western regions of the United States (five public and one private university, one designated an Hispanic Serving Institution). All collection sites used an identical data collection software tool (Qualtrics) and an identical set of survey items. Researchers obtained IRB approval for this study at each site. Recruitment of participants occurred using various methods (e.g., registrar lists, departmental listservs, research pools, psychology classes) to inform psychology majors and minors of the research opportunity. Two sites offered institutionally approved inducements to participants (i.e., a drawing for \$25.00 gift certificates or course credit).

A total of 1,020 participants accessed the study materials across all sites; however, only 751 of these participants provided usable data for our current analyses. Cases that were excluded came from participants who failed to complete the survey measures or participants in psychology courses who were not currently pursuing a major or minor in psychology. For the remaining 751 participants, although some occasional data points were missing, no replacement of missing data was undertaken in the final dataset so as to retain the integrity of participant responses. Therefore, some analyses had a small percentage of missing cases.

Demographics. Participants in our sample were psychology undergraduate students at 4-year institutions ($N = 751$) from the Northeast (22%), Southeast (9%), South (20%), Midwest (17%), Northwest (12%), and Western (20%) regions of the United States. This pattern suggests a slight underrepresentation of the Southeast and Northwest areas. Participants were primarily female (85%), and all were over the age of 18 years. Participants reported their cultural affiliations as European American (71%), Latinx American (14%), multiracial (4%), Asian American or African American (3% each), or International (2%). One percent or less identified (each) as Middle

Eastern, Hawaiian, Alaskan, and Pacific Islander American. With regard to participants' primary sexual orientation, 82% reported identifying as heterosexual, 8% as bisexual, 5% as asexual, 2% as lesbian, and 1% or less (each) as gay, fluid, or other. According to participants' self-reported estimates, the annual income of their family fell into the following categories: \$500K or more (4%), 100K–499K (29%), 50K–99K (40%), 30K–49K (17%), 29K or lower, or a family who received governmental financial assistance (10%). Participants reported their religious affiliation as Christian (55%), none (16%), agnostic (9%), generally spiritual (9%), atheist (5%), Jewish (3%), and Buddhist (2%), with less than 1% total affiliated with Hindu, Islamic, or folk/nature-based religions. Finally, with respect to political positioning, 22% identified as very liberal, 32% as somewhat liberal, 28% as moderate, 15% as somewhat conservative, and 3% as very conservative.

Academic information. Participants were largely psychology majors (70%), with the remainder being psychology minors. Thirteen percent reported that they were first-year students, 25% were sophomores, 32% were juniors, and 30% were seniors. Participants reported having taken an average of seven psychology courses ($SD = 4.4$; Mode = 5) at the time of sampling. Specifically, freshmen had taken an average of 2.4 psychology courses ($SD = 1.3$; Mode = 1); sophomores had taken an average of 4.2 psychology courses ($SD = 2.0$; Mode = 3); juniors had taken an average of 6.9 psychology courses ($SD = 3.1$; Mode = 5); and, seniors had taken an average of 9.7 psychology courses ($SD = 4.5$; Mode = 10).

Measures

Participants completed an online survey, reporting on their opinions concerning the general use of trigger warnings in the psychology classroom; the ways in which instructors conveyed such warnings; and, the number of psychology courses in which they had received such warnings. They also reported on the level of discomfort they experienced when covering 16 different topics in the psychology classroom; whether or not they believed trigger warnings were necessary for these topics; and, whether instructors had actually issued warnings for any of these topics. Next, participants reported on the maximum level of distress they felt during the most

disturbing topic covered during a psychology class; the extent to which this distress was disruptive to their learning; and how long this disruption of their learning lasted. Lastly, students rated their level of agreement with several statements about sensitive topics in psychology and the role of students and teachers in relation to those topics (see Table 3).

Participants rated items assessing opinions about trigger warnings on a scale from 1 (*extremely negative*) to 5 (*extremely favorable*), and one item assessing participants' belief about the effect of trigger warnings on their mental health ranged from 1 (*extremely harmful*) to 5 (*extremely helpful*). The items assessing topic discomfort ranged from 1 (*no discomfort*) to 5 (*an extreme amount*); the distress and disruption items ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*); the length of disruption of learning items ranged from 1 (*minutes*) to 5 (*months*); and ratings of statements about the role of sensitive topics in psychology education ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Participants also rated each of the 16 potentially sensitive topics as falling into one of four categories: (a) instructor issued a warning and it was necessary, (b) instructor issued a warning and it was unnecessary, (c) instructor did not issue a warning and it was necessary, and (d) instructor did not issue a warning and it was unnecessary.

Results

General Attitudes and Experiences With Trigger Warnings

With initial survey items, we asked students to report whether a psychology instructor had ever issued a "trigger warning" in one of their courses, as well as their general attitude toward trigger warnings in psychology classes. As in previous research (Boysen, Wells, & Dawson, 2016), these initial items did not include a definition of trigger warnings so that baseline familiarity with the concept could be assessed, and so that students would respond using their own preconceived definition of the concept. On these items, 57% of participants indicated that they had received a trigger warning, 30% had not, and 13% indicated that they were not familiar with the term. Most respondents (59%) held *somewhat favorable* attitudes about the use of trigger warnings in psychology classes ($M =$

3.7, $SD = .9$, Mode = 4). Students, on average, also believed that trigger warnings were *somewhat helpful* to their mental health ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.9$, Mode = 4).

To further establish students' experiences in psychology courses, we then provided respondents with a definition of trigger warnings as any notification preparing them for course content that they "might find sensitive, personally disturbing, controversial, or that could elicit troublesome emotions or memories." Based on this definition, 94% of students reported having received this type of warning from their psychology instructors in an average of 2.5 different psychology courses ($SD = 2.1$; mode = 2; range 1–16). As to the methods their instructors used to convey these warnings, the most frequently reported was the issuance of a warning as sensitive topics arose in class (61%), followed by warnings issued during the first day of class (40%), warnings as a part of the course syllabus (28%), warnings after a student was visibly distressed in class by a topic (5%), and warnings issued when professors reported that a student in class had approached them privately to share that a topic had been disturbing (4%).

Reactions to Topics and Trigger Warnings

Students rated the level of discomfort they experienced during coverage of 16 different topics in their psychology classes (see Table 1); the mean discomfort scores, across all topics, ranged from 1.55 to 2.37, with a modal response of 1. These scores corresponded to the qualitative anchors of discomfort ranging from *none* to *a small amount*. Participants also rated their experiences with receiving warnings and their perception of the necessity of such warnings in their psychology courses. Percentages for each response category across topics (necessity and if a warning was issued) can be seen in Table 2. Participants reported that the majority of psychology instructors provided what students perceived as *necessary* warnings for the topics that students reported as leading to their highest levels of discomfort. Specifically, four of the five topics most frequently selected as necessitating a warning where a warning was issued (sexual assault, child abuse, suicide, self-harm) were also rated by students as being in the top five topics that caused them the most discomfort (see Table 1). In contrast, the topics that stu-

Table 1
Student Ratings of Discomfort by Topic Area

Topic/Discomfort	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)/Mode	None	Small	Moderate	Large	Extreme
Sexual assault	2.37 / (1.28) / 1	32%	28%	17%	15%	8%
Suicide	2.14 / (1.20) / 1	39%	29%	16%	10%	6%
Child abuse	2.12 / (1.22) / 1	42%	26%	16%	10%	6%
Self-harm	1.94 / (1.12) / 1	47%	27%	15%	7%	4%
Psychiatric symptoms	1.94 / (1.14) / 1	49%	23%	16%	8%	4%
Violence/trauma	1.90 / (1.09) / 1	48%	26%	16%	6%	4%
Eating disorders	1.78 / (1.07) / 1	55%	23%	13%	5%	4%
Sexism	1.77 / (1.00) / 1	55%	24%	14%	5%	2%
Stigma	1.76 / (1.10) / 1	58%	21%	11%	6%	4%
Racial issues	1.75 / (.97) / 1	51%	31%	12%	4%	2%
Religious issues	1.73 / (1.04) / 1	57%	23%	11%	6%	3%
Sex orient/gender	1.64 / (1.00) / 1	63%	20%	10%	5%	2%
Human sexuality	1.63 / (.99) / 1	63%	20%	10%	4%	3%
Substance abuse	1.62 / (1.02) / 1	65%	19%	10%	3%	3%
Social class	1.59 / (1.01) / 1	66%	19%	9%	3%	3%
Physical disability	1.55 / (.97) / 1	68%	19%	7%	4%	2%

dents selected most frequently as necessitating a warning that was not issued (racial issues, sexual orientation, religious issues, sexism, human sexuality) received ratings, on average, indicating that these topics elicited no discomfort for students (see Table 1).

Next, we asked students to report the maximum level of distress they had experienced when their instructors covered a sensitive topic in their psychology classes without advance warning. A majority of the sample (52%) reported this most distressing incident as *not at all*

to a little distressing ($M = 2.49$; $SD = 1.27$; Mode = 1), with 24% stating it was *moderately* distressing, 10% *quite* distressing, and 7% *extremely* distressing. As to any disruption of learning that this most distressing incident had for students, 71% found the incident *not at all* or a little disruptive to their learning, with 16% finding it *moderately* disruptive, 10% *quite* disruptive, and 4% *extremely* disruptive ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.19$, Mode = 1). Most students reported that this disruption of learning lasted only minutes (68%); reports of disruptions lasting hours

Table 2
Student Ratings of Necessity for, and Issuance of, Trigger Warning by Topic Area

Topic	Necessary and issued	Necessary but not issued	Unnecessary but issued	Unnecessary and not issued
Sexual assault	65%	4%	16%	15%
Child abuse	54%	5%	17%	24%
Suicide	53%	5%	20%	22%
Violence/trauma	48%	6%	14%	32%
Self-harm	47%	5%	18%	30%
Eating disorders	42%	7%	16%	35%
Psychiatric symptoms	37%	8%	11%	44%
Stigma	35%	9%	8%	48%
Racial issues	34%	16%	8%	42%
Sex orient/gender	34%	14%	9%	43%
Human sexuality	30%	12%	7%	51%
Sexism	29%	13%	8%	50%
Substance abuse	28%	9%	13%	50%
Religious issues	26%	14%	10%	51%
Physical disability	25%	8%	7%	60%
Social class	15%	9%	6%	70%

Table 3
Agreement With Statements About the Appropriateness of Sensitive Topics and Warnings

Statement	M/(SD)/Mode
Psychology students should understand that education in psychology can and will expose them to potentially controversial or disturbing content in their courses or classroom discussions.	4.60/(.76)/5
Psychology students are taught and exposed to potentially controversial or disturbing content in their courses or classroom discussions because such content is relevant to their training and future careers.	4.58/(.74)/5
Psychology students should be at a point in their maturity and understanding of the world to realize that controversial or disturbing content in their courses or classroom discussions are necessary aspects of their learning.	4.38/(.95)/5
Psychology instructors who purposefully avoid covering potentially controversial or disturbing content in their courses or classroom discussions compromise and limit the full learning potential of their psychology students.	4.30/(1.10)/5
Psychology instructors generally use good professional judgment when deciding to expose psychology students to potentially controversial or disturbing content in their courses or classroom discussions.	4.20/(.88)/5
Even when psychology instructors warn their students that potentially controversial or disturbing content will be a part of the course or classroom discussions, some students will still experience distress and this is acceptable.	4.13/(.90)/4
Psychology instructors should always warn their students when potentially controversial or disturbing content will be a part of the course or classroom discussions.	3.82/(1.14)/4
Psychology instructors have a professional responsibility to make sure their students are not disturbed in any way by potentially controversial or disturbing content in courses or classroom discussions.	3.82/(1.14)/4
Psychology students who are bothered by controversial or disturbing content in their courses or classroom discussions should use that experience to guide them away from psychology courses, minors, and majors.	2.87/(1.33)/2
Psychology students who are bothered by controversial or disturbing content in their courses or classroom discussions should be, without penalty, provided with alternate non-disturbing content to learn instead.	2.41/(1.25)/2
Psychology instructors should avoid covering any controversial or disturbing content that has the chance of adversely affecting students in their courses or classroom discussions.	1.51/(.89)/1

Note. The scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

(19%), days (8%), weeks (3%), or months (2%) were less common.

Attitudes About Sensitive Topics and Trigger Warnings in Psychology Education

We next examined some specific attitudes students held about the role that sensitive topics play in their psychology education (see Table 3). On average, students *somewhat agreed* that teachers should provide content warnings and prevent student distress. However, the sample also *somewhat to extremely agreed* that covering sensitive issues in psychology pedagogy is a necessary part of their education; that psychology students should understand and accept this fact; and, that instructors used good professional judgment when choosing to cover sensitive topics as such discussions were necessary to students' training and education. Also, participants reported that psychology students who

found sensitive topics disturbing should not be allowed to have alternative assignments to avoid covering these topics, nor should psychology teachers avoid covering sensitive topics so as to avoid the potential of disturbing students. Despite these consistently held convictions, participants did not agree with the idea that students who were disturbed by sensitive topics should use those reactions to guide them away from a psychology major.

Effects of Demographic Variables on Attitudes

Research indicates that topics related to personal demographic characteristics or identity can be difficult for some students to interact on (cf. Basford et al., 2014; Hughey et al., 2017; Woodford et al., 2013), so we conducted exploratory analyses to determine if students ex-

perienced increased distress in relation to topics that were more central to their identity. Our hypothesis was that students would report increased experienced distress surrounding those course topics related to their personal identities (e.g., women more discomforted than men by discussions of sexism or sexual assault; students of color more discomforted than European American students by discussions of racism). To control for multiple comparisons in analyses, we used a Bonferroni-corrected alpha of $p < .005$.

We found that women reported significantly more discomfort surrounding the topic of sexism than men $F(1, 749) = 8.28; p < .004; \eta_p^2 = .011$; observed power = .82; M males = 1.5 ($SD = .9$) versus M females = 1.8 ($SD = 1.0$). A statistically significant finding by sex for the topic of eating disorders also emerged $F(1, 749) = 14.38; p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .019$; observed power = .97; M males = 1.4 ($SD = .8$) versus M females = 1.9 ($SD = 1.1$). In particular, regarding sexual assault, women reported significantly more discomfort than men $F(1, 749) = 18.29; p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .024$; observed power = .99; M males = 1.9 ($SD = 1.1$) versus M females = 2.5 ($SD = 1.3$). Although the mean comparisons for sexism and eating disorders found both men and women falling within the *no discomfort to a small amount of discomfort* qualitative range, the mean comparison for sexual assault found women reporting a mean level of discomfort between *a small amount to a moderate amount* of discomfort, a step above that of men's level of *no discomfort to a small amount of discomfort*.

Regarding the topic of sexual orientation, sexually diverse (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual) students reported significantly more discomfort than heterosexual students $F(1, 749) = 17.85; p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .023$; observed power = .99; M sexually diverse students = 2.0 ($SD = 1.0$) versus M heterosexual students = 1.6 ($SD = 1.1$). The means of both groups fell within the *no discomfort to a small amount of discomfort* range. Statistically significant differences did not emerge between students of color and European American students on racism or between religious and nonreligious students regarding religious issues. Politically liberal and conservative students also failed to show statistically significant mean differences surrounding re-

ported discomfort when covering aforementioned topics concerning social issues.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to document psychology students' perceptions of potentially sensitive topics and trigger warnings in the classroom. Most psychology students hold favorable views regarding the use of trigger warnings in the psychology classroom, and they endorsed the necessity of these warnings in conjunction with some of the topics we provided. Nonetheless, the majority of students reported having no or a small amount of discomfort related to classroom discussion of the sensitive topics listed on our survey. For most topics, the proportion of students reporting *large* or *extreme* levels of discomfort during class discussions was under 10%. Moreover, when recalling their most distressing experiences during classroom discussions of a sensitive topic, for which their instructors provided no trigger warning, nearly three out of four students indicated that the distress they experienced brought little to no disruption to their learning. These findings indicate that a minority of psychology students reported experiencing the higher levels of distress likely targeted by trigger warnings. Thus, to the extent that trigger warnings are effective at preventing distress, these benefits may extend only to a subset of students. However, it is important to note that our measures of distress, and the impact of experienced distress on learning, were retrospective in nature and may not fully reflect students' immediate emotional and behavioral reactions in the classroom.

Despite the overall low levels of distress reported by students, they did find some topics as significantly more distressing than others. Students reported experiencing the most distress in relation to the topics of sexual assault, suicide, and child abuse. These topics concerning violence and harm are related to the type of real life traumas that meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), and are consistent with the original conceptualization of the use of trigger warnings as a way to protect individuals from having intrusive, distressing symptoms. Although the mean ratings of distress for these specific topics fell within the qualitative anchor range of a *small* to

moderate amount, our results also indicate that 6% to 8% of students rated these topics as causing them the highest possible rating of distress they could endorse (*extreme*). Notably, the topics that students selected as causing them the most distress overlapped with the topics for which they had received a trigger warning they viewed as necessary. This finding suggests that many psychology instructors are aware of the topics that can have a strong impact on students and issue warnings to prepare students for these topics.

Conversely, the topics for which psychology students viewed trigger warnings as necessary, but reported that their instructors had not provided warnings, included issues related to race, sexual orientation and gender, religion, sexism, and human sexuality. Instructors may view these topics as potentially less distressing for students because they primarily relate to social identity and social justice issues rather than clinical trauma. Our results suggest, however, that students who have culturally diverse demographic characteristics as a part of their personal identity view some of these topics as more distressing than their majority culture counterparts. Specifically, the results showed that topics related to sex/gender and sexual orientation can be particularly distressing for students who identify as female or sexually diverse. This finding is in need of further exploration, as some classroom controversies have emerged when students have objected to professors' or other students' comments surrounding these issues (Brown, 2016). As such, psychology teachers should consider the role of advance warnings (and the presentation of materials and comments) concerning topics that might be sensitive to demographically underrepresented groups of students in their classes.

A final, key outcome of our study was the consensus among students that potentially distressing topics have an appropriate role in the pedagogy of psychological science. Psychology students in our sample strongly endorsed the beliefs that they should expect to encounter potentially disturbing content during class, that some students will inevitably experience distress surrounding these topics, and that this distress does not warrant student avoidance of sensitive topics. Irrespective of trigger warnings, students did not believe that their education in psychology should be compromised by the

avoidance of sensitive topics in order to ward off potential distress.

Limitations

Our study was based on a large, national sample of undergraduate psychology students, but care should be taken in generalizing the results of our study. For example, our sample mostly included students at large, public, 4-year institutions. Campuses with specific missions or educational environments (e.g., religious or private colleges) may have student bodies or institutional policies that require special consideration of certain topics in psychology education. The case may also be true that high school, community college, and graduate students of psychology may not hold similar attitudes, or have had similar experiences, as those reported by students at 4-year institutions. Also, our sample was largely female, European American, heterosexual, Christian, and middle-to-upper class. Our findings should be replicated using more culturally and socioeconomically diverse samples of psychology students. We also did not gather data from the instructors who taught the students in our sample, so student reports of trigger warning use may not accurately reflect the actions or intentions of their instructors. Finally, all of the measures in our study consisted of retrospective reports, and students may be less than accurate in recalling or judging their previous levels of distress or how that distress impacted their learning.

Future Research

Our study provides a first look at psychology students' attitudes and experiences concerning trigger warnings, but additional research is needed. Our findings need to be replicated with data from other national level studies before we can accurately describe a "common" or "general" foundation of psychology students' attitudes and experiences surrounding the use of trigger warnings. Research is also needed to uncover how student-based variables (e.g., previous trauma, history of mental health treatment, personality characteristics) and instructional variables (e.g., course topics, class size, pedagogical approaches) impact student perceptions of potentially distressing topics and trigger warnings. In particular, there is a need to compare students who have a history of trauma to

students with no such history—what is helpful for one group may not be of benefit to the other. In addition, the effect of trigger warnings on students' experienced levels of distress and their learning must be directly measured. Instructors need empirical evidence on the direct short- and long-term effects of course content and trigger warnings to inform their choices concerning implementation. Furthermore, studies comparing faculty behaviors and student reactions to the same topics, in the same classroom, would provide convergent evidence for the effects and effectiveness of trigger warnings.

Conclusion

Both within and outside of psychology, the polemic issue of trigger warnings needs to be addressed with data rather than rhetoric, and viewed as a complex issue. Instructors are motivated to educate students in the science of psychology in the most positive and pedagogically sound manner possible. Based on our current findings, the positive engagement of psychology students does not appear to require routine trigger warnings for all sensitive topics. Rather, our data suggest that psychology students do not see all potentially distressing topics as equally necessitating advance warning; perhaps instructors should follow their lead. More sensitive topics in psychology, especially those related to trauma and violence, may be significantly distressing to a subset of students, and teachers should consider whether the best way to serve these students is to provide warnings to all students or offer more personalized accommodations. Whatever pedagogical choice is made, psychology students believe that their education should not be compromised by the avoidance of sensitive topics, and we concur.

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