



Introduction

The Problem

- o Recent years have seen professionals in higher education battle over trigger warnings (TW).
 - o *Definition:* Warnings given to students by instructors about sensitive topics
- o Despite numerous ostensibly empirical claims (e.g., TW are bad for mental health, TW are good for mental health; TW are bad for learning, TW are good for learning), empirical explorations are limited.
 - When surveyed, abnormal psychology instructors showed great ambivalence (as a group) in their use (49% did not, 31% did) and opinion (44% negative, 25% positive) of TW (Boysen, Wells, & Dawson, 2015).
 - A review of the relevant PTSD-related literature suggests that TW are a reasonable accommodation for a clinical disability, but there is no evidence for the effectiveness of TW for sensitivities (Boysen, 2017).
- o Only 10 studies on trigger warnings since 2016
 - o 7 surveys, primarily in teaching journals
 - o Key outcomes: Student and instructor *attitudes* and *beliefs* about TW in classroom contexts
 - o 3 experiments, in clinical and social psychological journals
 - o Key outcomes: Anxiety and negative affect following exposure to difficult content (e.g., reading or video), with or without TW
 - o Moderators: Beliefs about TW, beliefs that words can harm, emotion regulation strategies

Limitations of Existing Research

- o Mostly self-report and retrospective survey data
- o Exclusion of participants with history of trauma
- o Primarily online samples, not student samples
- o Extreme examples of trigger warning content (great for internal validity and power, but does not necessarily reflect use of trigger warnings in real classroom contexts)
- o Emphasis on emotional, not learning, outcomes

The Current Research

o Goals

- Distinguish between types of warnings when considering impact on cognitive and emotional responses
- Examine TW using the most relevant sample, undergraduate students with a range of prior experiences with trauma and mental illness
- Consider learning and behavioural outcomes, in addition to emotional responses to difficult material with and without warnings

Potential Pedagogical Impact

- o Despite the vigor of the public discourse, the decision to use trigger warnings (or not to use them) is currently a value-based one – the evidence regarding emotional outcomes is limited and contradictory, and the evidence on learning outcomes is non-existent
- o This work will contribute to a data-based conversation about TW in the classroom – why, how, when, and whether to use them.

Proposed Method

Experimental Manipulation

Blatant trigger warning:
“Just to let you know, the essay you are about to read requires a trigger warning due to its disturbing content and may trigger an anxiety response in those who have a history of trauma”

Unnamed trigger warning:
“Just to let you know, the essay you are about to read covers sensitive subject matter”

Control/no trigger warning

Story Stress Induction

“The checkout line at Westbury Neighborhood Market stretched down the counter and into the aisle that held an array of packaged donuts and mini-cakes, right next to the aisle that held shelves of magazines shouting at customers to ‘Ditch the Donuts AND Inches off Your Waist!!!’ The windows glittered with frost that clung to the glass, despite the weatherman’s prediction for a “toasty Christmas.” Marie Moore gripped the handle of her basket tighter as the line crept forward, slowed by the pre-Christmas Eve traffic of grandmothers preparing for rambunctious grandchildren and couples looking forward to spending the next few days off work... Marie froze, midway between reaching for her wallet, as an unwelcome and sudden thought bled its way into her conscious – reminding her of something she had long been trying to forget. A memory from almost exactly a year ago, when Marie had been intoxicated with expensive Moore family wine – Le Vignoble, as her mother-in-law had emphasized – and thrilled with her recent marriage to a mysterious and wealthy bachelor from the main city... She realized with an acrid taste in her mouth that the scenario had repeated itself once more on New Year’s Day – that she’d had nearly the exact same experience once again. The feeling of waking up hungover, not knowing what had occurred – and the bruises...”

Key Outcomes

Cognitive

- o Memory for story (24 item)

Affective – State

- o State anxiety (e.g., tense, strained, nervous)
- o Positive and negative affect (e.g., interested, alert, attentive, jittery, upset)
- o Attention regulation while reading story

Affective – Trait

- o Beliefs about trigger warnings
- o Belief that words can harm
- o Locus of control for mental health (e.g., “If my mental health worsens, it is my own behaviour which determines how soon I feel better again”)
- o Emotional self-efficacy (e.g., understand what causes emotions to change)

Educational-Behavioural

- o Perceived Instructor Responsiveness (e.g., “My instructor made me feel cared for”)
- o Instructor Autonomy Support (e.g., “My instructor conveyed confidence in my ability to do well in the course”)
- o Long-term Behavioural Avoidance (e.g., Would you take a class/come to the next class/drop a course/do an assigned reading for an instructor who assigned this material?)

Personal Background

- o Depression and anxiety
- o History of trauma
- o SES, Ethnicity, Gender, Political ideology

Spotlight: Undergraduate Collaboration



Grace Draskovic

What were you expecting when I first asked you to do this study with me?

When you first asked I expected that I would be primarily doing administrative work and that the study design was relatively set.

What was exactly as you expected about the research process?

I did expect that it would be a long process because of my experience as a research assistant in another lab.

What surprised you about the research process?

I think what surprised me is how collaborative this process has been and how much confidence I have gained. As an undergraduate I underestimated how much I could contribute to study design, now I feel more confident that although I still have a great deal to learn I can also provide meaningful insight.

What, if anything, has changed in the way you think about how research is done?

I now have a greater appreciation for just how many people are involved in research and how many hours are spent in the beginning stages. I used to think that the greatest amount of time was spent in the collection stages and now I understand that getting the framework right and initial administrative tasks take up a significant amount of time.

What lessons have you learned from this process so far, either about research specifically or broader things, like project management, administration, teamwork, etc.?

I have learned that research does have a point of view and to read articles critically more than anything else. To me this represents a fundamental shift in my educational life from student to participant in a field of research.

Status of Project

Substantial Setbacks

- o In addition to inevitable delays that occur in project planning while teaching a full course load with new preps, we also experienced significant delay with the ethics review process
 - o Benefit: extra time to carefully consider emotional response to study material and craft consent and debrief materials
- o Delays in lab construction

Current Plan

- o Data collection to take place July-August 2019
 - o With help of 2 volunteer research assistants
- o Use of Psychology 100 subject pool