

Trigger Warnings in the Classroom: Student and Instructor
Perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative case study looked at the use of trigger warnings in an introductory-level gender studies course at a large, public research university. Trigger warnings are understood to be any information given, either verbal or in writing, that serves to tell students about particular content that the instructor will be addressing in class that could be traumatic for students with particular experiences related to that content. Supporters of trigger warnings believe that they make classrooms more inclusive and help support students with certain backgrounds, such as veterans, refugees, and students with PTSD or other mental health issues. Those against trigger warnings insist that they diminish students' resiliency and infringe on instructors' academic freedom. This study examines the use of trigger warnings and the effect their usage has on instructors and students. Data collection involved classroom observations and interviews with five students, two teaching assistants, and a faculty member. Findings were divided into three categories: classroom experiences, history with trigger warnings, and views of trigger warnings. Discussion and implications include suggestions for improving the use of trigger warnings in the classroom and the need for increased collaboration between instructors and students.

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Introduction

In this paper, the author details a qualitative case study involving the use of trigger warnings in a gender studies class at a large, public research university in the Midwest. A trigger warning is any intentional act of caution given by an instructor to students with the intention of preparing students for an upcoming topic that will be discussed in class and may cause distress to students based their own unique lived experiences. Through a review of the literature, the author gives a brief history of trigger warnings within academia and details current conversations around trigger warnings happening on campuses across the country. Trigger warnings are then placed within larger conversations around academic freedom and students' rights, as well as within conversations around inclusive classrooms. The author also uses bell hooks' (1994) theory of engaged pedagogy to detail why some instructors may choose to use trigger warnings in their classrooms. The author places trigger warnings within a harm reduction framework and situates this paper within current literature on the topic.

Next, the author details the methodology of the study including the observation protocol, participant details, and the coding procedures used. This section also includes information on the researcher's positionality in this study, as well as limitations. Findings from the study are presented, detailing the interviewees' classroom experiences, histories with trigger warnings, and views of trigger warnings. This section is followed by discussion of these findings. Implications of this study include ideas for further research as well as suggestions for instructors who wish to employ trigger warnings in their classrooms. Finally, the author concludes by connecting this study to current research and reiterating the importance of research on this topic.

Literature Review

In recent years, college students across the nation have been increasingly demanding notice from their professors before certain topics are brought up in class. These so-called “trigger warnings” have prompted much debate from all sides of academia and beyond (Boysen, Wells, & Dawson, 2016). Trigger warnings are often given verbally at the start of a semester or a certain class period, and can also be included in syllabi that detail the topics covered in class. While some feel that providing trigger warnings gives students an excuse to disengage in the classroom, calls for trigger warnings follow criticism from both within academia and the public, arguing that addressing certain subjects taught in the college classroom can traumatize some students. Trauma expert Cathy Caruth (1996) defines trauma as, “the response to an unexpected to overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (p. 104). Furthermore, psychologist Avgi Saketopoulou (2014) describes the experience of being “triggered” as “a paralyzing, overwhelming cascade of emotion and physiological responses commensurate not with the anticipation of danger but with the experience of the danger itself” (p. 1).

Trigger Warnings and Trauma in the Classroom

While the experience of trauma can be different for each person, common responses or symptoms of trauma include increased heart rate, difficulty breathing, sweating, muscular tension, constriction of the nervous system, dissociation, dysphoria, feeling numb, lapses in concentration, and even loss of consciousness (Caruth, 1996). Similarly, individuals who have experienced trauma often cope with sensitivity to light

and sound, difficulty sleeping, a reduced capacity to manage stress, anxiety, amnesia, chronic fatigue, headaches, and diminished social interests (Levine, 2008). Researchers suggest that trauma can change the neurology of individuals and can even be genetically transmitted through generations in a phenomenon commonly known as historical or intergenerational trauma (Brave Heart, 1999). Finally, while the debate around trigger warnings most often mentions students diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as the primary beneficiaries of such warnings, even those who are not diagnosed with PTSD can experience trigger-like symptoms because of exposure to traumatic topics (Scott, Chant, Andrews, Martin, & McGrath, 2007).

Common subjects that may warrant a trigger warning include depictions of violence, sexual assault, war, or incest as well as mentions of sexism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Semitism, ableism, and other topics related to privilege and oppression (Hickey, 2016). For example, an article on the shooting of an unarmed black man by police may be labeled as having content that addresses police brutality and racism (Kamenetz, 2016).

While the debate over the pros and cons of using trigger warnings in the classroom continues to gain national attention, research shows that many professors are indeed using such warnings. In a survey of college professors conducted in 2015 by National Public Radio, more than half of the respondents reported using a trigger warning (Kamenetz, 2016). Most respondents reported that they did so on their own accord, not because a student or administrator requested them. This survey included responses from 829 undergraduate instructors, 53.9% of whom taught at public four-year institutions with 27% at two-year colleges (Kamenetz, 2016). At public four-year colleges, 51% of

professors had used trigger warnings. This rate was 55% at public, two-year colleges and 39% at private, 4-year colleges. Three percent of professors said that a student had requested a trigger warning while 67% said that they used a trigger warning because they personally felt the need to do so (Kamenetz, 2016). Respondents were most likely to use a warning in reference to sexual or violent material. Other common topics were sexual assault, incest, and female genital mutilation. None of the professors reported that they had a student who tried to get out of an assignment. The most common response to a warning was either nothing at all or for a student to excuse themselves for a few minutes before returning to class (Kamenetz, 2016).

In another survey of abnormal psychology professors, more than 50% had used a trigger warning at least once (Boysen et al., 2016). This survey had 131 participants with an average of 18 years of teaching experience. Sixty-two percent of respondents taught at private colleges. Common topics for which trigger warnings were offered included suicide, child abuse, self-harm, violence, and pedophilia (Boysen et al., 2016). The most common method for offering trigger warnings was to give verbal warnings throughout the semester. Although more than 50% of respondents had used a trigger warning, only 25% indicated that their opinion of such warnings was favorable while the other 75% held either no opinion or negative opinions about trigger warnings in the classroom (Boysen et al., 2016). Similarly, the National Coalition Against Censorship surveyed 800 liberal arts professors and found that over half had given either a verbal warning or a written warning before certain course content, however more than 75% of respondents did not respond favorably to the term “trigger warning” (Sturgis, 2016). Because professors may not identify as using “trigger warnings” even if they do give their students

some sort of notice before certain topics, it may be difficult to collect valid survey data on how many professors are using trigger warnings.

Trigger Warnings and Personal Freedoms

Discussions around trigger warnings often fall within a greater debate about students' right to an education, professors' responsibility to respond to student needs, and academic freedom. Angela Carter (2015), a Ph.D. student at the University of Minnesota who specializes in disability studies, states that those against trigger warnings incorrectly conflate trauma and discomfort. Carter details the emotional and physical responses of actual trauma that make learning impossible such as excessive perspiration, rapid heartbeat, flashbacks, and fainting and intentionally differentiates these responses from feelings of discomfort. Most proponents of such warnings do not see being offended as trauma and do not want students to shy away from challenging their beliefs (Rae, 2016).

Within the context of academic freedom, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) argues that trigger warnings lead to faculty without tenure being punished for teaching about certain topics such as sexual violence, hate crimes, or war and, therefore, calls for trigger warnings can lead to some faculty avoiding those topics (AAUP, 2014). AAUP (2014) further asserts that trigger warnings can affect how students experience assignments because they will be focusing on certain topics and that trigger warnings “reduce students to vulnerable victims rather than full participants in the intellectual process of education” (p. 2). Others against trigger warnings call them “catastrophizing”, meaning they turn a small situation into a bigger issue than it really is, and predict that such warnings will lead to increased litigation as students who always expect safety enter the workplace (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015, p. 5). Trigger warnings, as a

threat to academic freedom, are a concern amongst university faculty, as evidenced by a September 2016 University of Chicago welcome letter sent by the dean of students to all university students before the start of the academic year. This letter, based on recommendations made by the school's faculty committee on academic freedom, told students that the university believes that trigger warnings are a type of censorship because they encourage faculty to avoid certain subjects and therefore the university does not support them (Schaper, 2016).

In contrast to the belief that trigger warnings make teaching more difficult for professors, Dr. Eleanor Amaranth Lockhart (2016), faculty member at Texas A&M University, explains that warnings can help support professors without tenure because they show compassion for students which may result in more positive feedback in student evaluations. Similarly, Dr. Logan Rae (2016), faculty member at Syracuse University, tells that those who argue that teachers will shy away from hard topics in fear of student backlash should not blame trigger warnings and should instead view the threat to academic freedom coming from administrators who refuse to support faculty facing student opposition. Rae (2016) argues that trigger warnings are about recognizing that students bring different experiences to the classroom and that not everyone "has the privilege to learn uninterrupted" (p. 5). Angela Carter (2015) calls trigger warnings a way for students to opt in to participating in discussions and other classroom activities, and compares such warnings to automatic doors that allow people who use a wheelchair to more easily enter a building.

Other advocates for trigger warnings argue that professors are not trained counsellors who can deal with triggered students. Kate Manne (2016), assistant professor

of philosophy at Cornell University, asserts that trigger warnings do not encourage students to avoid material, instead they allow students to prepare themselves so they can participate. She recognizes that no matter how hard students want to participate, they are unable to if they experience a trigger. She also believes that using these warnings may make other students more sensitive to the fact that their classmates may have different experiences which in turn can lead to a more sensitive, accepting citizenry (Manne, 2016). Yurie Hong (2013), classics professor at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, writes that adding trigger warnings “is a powerful, yet low-stakes, way to support survivors and raise student awareness” (p. 1).

Trigger Warnings and Inclusive Classrooms

The University of Michigan’s Center for Research on Teaching and Learning uses the following definition for inclusive classrooms:

Inclusive classrooms are classrooms in which instructors and students work together to create and sustain an environment in which everyone feels safe, supported, and encouraged to express her or his views and concerns. In these classrooms, the content is explicitly viewed from the multiple perspectives and varied experiences of a range of groups. Content is presented in a manner that reduces all students' experiences of marginalization and, wherever possible, helps students understand that individuals' experiences, values, and perspectives influence how they construct knowledge in any field or discipline. (Saunders & Kardia, n.d., p. 1)

This definition emphasizes the collaboration needed between students and instructors and the need for reducing the marginalization of students. This definition is widely cited and used by others looking to make their classrooms more inclusive.

Trigger warnings can be viewed as one strategy that has recently emerged for creating inclusive classrooms. Researchers assert that one of the first steps for professors in creating this inclusive environment is acknowledging that certain topics can be difficult for some students, depending on their experiences (Armstrong, 2011). Using trigger warnings in the classroom directly stems from the acknowledgment of this and serves as one way to make these subjects less difficult for students.

Researchers have found that inclusive classrooms can increase student engagement and allow students to better connect with the classroom material and the instructor(s). Creating inclusive classrooms can also help students feel more comfortable and increase students' overall performance (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro & Lovett, 2010). One strategy that researchers recommend to instructors who wish to create inclusive classrooms is that instructors get to know their students, including who they are outside of the classroom, and be responsive to student needs. Because trigger warnings acknowledge that not every student experiences topics the same, they are one strategy for responding to student needs and recognizing that students bring different experiences into the classroom.

Often used as part of the discourse around inclusive classrooms, bell hooks' (1994) theory of engaged pedagogy says that most students will bring their whole selves into the classroom, including all their experiences, and professors must teach in a way that promotes the well-being of all students. Vital to this theory is the understanding that

education, both inside and outside the classroom, is not neutral. Every lesson, discussion, and class topic exists within the current political and social environment (hooks, 1994). In order to enact this engaged pedagogy in the classroom, instructors must create an environment that values the experiences of all students. Classrooms should go beyond the simple transfer of knowledge and allow each student to meaningfully participate in a way that fosters their own growth as an individual (Chahine, 2013). Teaching in this way encourages student participation, dialogue, and self-reflection. Engaged pedagogy also requires instructors to critically analyze their own positionality in the classroom, involves students in the process of knowledge production, and continuously improves instructors' relationships with students (Glass & Wong, 2003).

Creating inclusive classrooms and enacting an engaged pedagogy are aligned with providing trigger warnings to students. Alexandra Sastre (2017), feminist media studies scholar, calls trigger warnings a “small but vital step in fostering an inclusive classroom environment” (p. 1). Similarly, Sayantani Dasgupta (2014), faculty member at Columbia University, uses bell hooks' engaged pedagogy as a reason why she uses trigger warnings in her medical school classrooms. She situates her use of trigger warnings as part of “caring for the souls” of her students (Dasgupta, 2014, p.1). As instructors seek ways to make their classroom more inclusive and incorporate principals of engaged pedagogy, they should consider employing trigger warnings as a necessary step towards this goal.

Trigger Warnings and Harm Reduction

Nichole Fournier-Sylvester (2013), education scholar at Concordia University Montreal, asserts that professors should not teach controversial topics without first being trained on facilitation skills and strategies for minimizing harm during class discussions.

Such strategies include redirecting when arguments move beyond the topic, identifying when students are disengaging, and reconsidering when certain topics are necessary to achieve class goals.

One strategy in political science classrooms has been the use of a “safe word” in classes when discussing difficult topics such as sexual assault and violence in film. Students who start to feel uncomfortable can say the safe word and the professor works with them to reengage them in the discussion or offer alternative ways for them to participate (Hayden, 2010). This recognition that certain class content can be traumatic for students and that students should be able to express their needs is one part of the argument for the use of trigger warnings.

Scholars also argue that classroom content, even when it includes content that is graphic or violent, should not shock students, and professors should not be using shock response as an educational tool or to keep students engaged (Lockhart, 2016). Paul McEwan (2007), a film studies professor who frequently teaches courses on violence in film, writes that teaching should be an “act of intellectual empathy” and works to individualize teaching strategies for any student who becomes upset by class content, thus reducing any potential harm or trauma that could come to that student as a result of the violent films shown (p. 94).

Students have demanded trigger warnings at campuses across the nation, including the University of California Santa Barbara, Oberlin College, Rutgers, University of Michigan, George Washington University, Bryn Mawr College, and Wellesley College (Sturgis, 2016). At the University of Minnesota, the student government panel recently encouraged faculty to give trigger warnings to students in

class and on syllabi, arguing that the college is enrolling large numbers of combat veterans and refugees (Freidrich, 2014). The National Center of Education Statistics (2017) confirms that colleges across the country are enrolling veteran students and refugees at an all-time high. For example, veteran students currently make up around 5% of all undergraduate students enrolled in higher education, a number that has grown over the past decade and is expected to continue rising (American Council on Education, 2014).

Supporters of trigger warnings intentionally differentiate between experiences of being triggered and feelings of discomfort or having one's opinion challenged by clarifying the difference in physiological responses to each situation and the former's connection to PTSD symptoms (Carter, 2015). Supporters also point to the increased prevalence and severity of mental health conditions within college student populations (Carter, 2015). In a 2014 survey of college counseling centers, 94% of directors reported an increase in severe psychological problems amongst new students (Novotney, 2014). Increased rates of violence experienced by youth may also be a reason why more students are requesting trigger warnings. A 2015 national survey of children's exposure to violence showed that more than 60% of children under 17 experience some type of trauma (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, and Hamby, 2015). According to the National Violence Resource Center, 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives (Black et. al., 2010). As of 2015, 1 in 6 college students had been diagnosed with a mental illness (Brown, 2016). The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reports that students with mental disabilities are more likely to drop out of college because of perceived stigma and discrimination rather than because of symptoms related

to their disability. Finally, 86% of students with severe mental health problems leave college before completing a degree (Collins & Mombray, 2005). The use of trigger warnings in the classroom is a way to acknowledge trauma and other mental health issues that students may face, therefore potentially mitigating some of the stigma, discrimination, and other harm that comes to these students.

Those against the use of trigger warnings in the classroom assert that students struggling with PTSD or other mental health issues should not be treated any differently from other students. They argue that college classrooms are safe spaces for students to be exposed to trauma and that the use of trigger warnings will lead to more students being traumatized because they will learn to fear certain subjects (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Similarly, they argue that trigger warnings make college students less resilient and that students need to be challenged by exposure to sensitive topics in the classroom in order to learn (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Robbins (2016) also argues that instead of helping students with PTSD, trigger warnings reinforce trauma because they remind students that certain material can be traumatic.

While some research and other published works have contributed to the debate over the use of trigger warnings in the classroom, there is no available research that includes student voices on this topic. Because this topic directly affects educational experiences of students, illuminating their voices is key to understanding this issue. This qualitative study seeks to illuminate student and faculty voices and examine the experiences that occur within one gender studies classroom that uses trigger warnings. This study uses field notes from classroom observations as well as semi-structured interviews of students, teaching assistants (TAs), and one faculty member to explore the

implementation and implications of trigger warnings. The following section details procedures for data collection and analysis and provides further context for the study and the researcher.

Methods

This study examines the use of trigger warnings as a teaching method around sensitive subjects in the college classroom. Outlined in the following section are the research questions addressed by this study, critical terms, procedures for data collection and analysis, researcher background, and potential limitations of this study. To examine the use of trigger warnings in the classroom, the researcher conducted a qualitative case study. Yin (1984) defines case study research methodology as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context... and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23). Case studies are often used for examining phenomenon which has not been extensively studied in the past and can be a way to open the topic for further research (Zainal, 2007). Because the use of trigger warnings in the classroom, including its effect on students and instructors, has not been the topic of prior research studies, case study methodology was the best fit for providing an in-depth analysis that could then be built upon in further research studies.

Trigger warnings in the classroom are a commonly debated topic in higher education. They have been the topic of many opinion pieces and newspaper articles (e.g. Boysen et al., 2016; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Lockhart, 2016; Manne, 2016; Robbins, 2016). Across the country, students at some institutions have begun to request trigger warnings from their professors and faculty organizations have also begun to consider the role trigger warnings have in their classrooms. Because of the increased attention to

trigger warnings and the lack of research in this area, the researcher saw the need for an in-depth study on the use and consequences of trigger warnings in a college classroom.

Therefore, the questions addressed by this study are:

- How, and why, do instructors use trigger warnings?
- How do students respond to trigger warnings and why?
- What impacts do trigger warnings have in the classroom?

For the purpose of this study, a trigger warning is understood to be any information given, either verbal or in writing, that serves to tell students about particular content that the instructor will be addressing in class that could be traumatic for students with particular experiences related to that content. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Participants

This study took place at a large, public research university which serves a diverse undergraduate student population consisting of 20% students of color, 52% female students and 36% out-of-state students. According to the *U.S. News and World Report* (2017) this university is more selective, enrolling less than half of all applicants.

Data consisted of interview transcriptions and field notes from observation of an introductory-level gender studies class. The class was made up of 80 undergraduate students with majors ranging from gender studies to computer science, three teaching assistants, and one faculty member. The entire class met for a 55-minute lecture twice a week, and each student was assigned to 1 of 6 discussion sections, which met once a week. Each discussion section enrolled 10 to 15 students, was overseen by a teaching assistant and each teaching assistant was responsible for two discussion sections.

Teaching assistants were first or second year doctoral students in the gender studies department. Discussion sections were also 55-minutes long. Every other week during the semester, the researcher observed lectures, as well as the same two discussion sections. The focus of the class was on the intersections between feminism and science, as well as how science has been used to harm marginalized populations. The class addressed topics such as the history of racism, the social construction of race, mental health issues, violence against transgender people, forced sterilizations, drug testing on communities of color, and abortion. To determine which classes to observe, the researcher worked with the instructors to identify classes that touched upon topics that may warrant a trigger warning. Class sessions observed included those that focused on oppression, acts of violence, and reproductive justice.

Interviews were conducted with five students in the class, as well as two teaching assistants and the professor. The professor, a non-tenured faculty member, had taught the class once before and has over 10 years of teaching experience at various institutions. Both teaching assistants identified as white and non-binary. While one teaching assistant had experience leading classes, the other teaching assistant had never held a teaching assistant role before. All students interviewed were undergraduates. Three students were first-years, one was in their second year, and another was a junior. Four of the students identified as white and one of the students identified as black. Three students were cisgender women, one student was a cisgender man, and the fifth student identified as non-binary. All participants consented to be interviewed and interviews were recorded. Participants were recruited through classroom announcements and email. Participation in

interviews was optional and did not affect students' grade in the class. Interviewees received no compensation for their participation.

Materials

The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews and class observations. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher determines a general structure by deciding topics covered and main questions to be asked (Drever, 1995). The specific details of the interview structure is then decided during the interview and interviewee has the freedom to decide additional topics and how they would like to express their answers. This style of interviewing is more flexible and is recommended for small-scale research, including case studies (Drever, 1995).

Observation notes from 10 class lectures and 15 class discussion sections were organized into field notes. The details of the observation, including what would be observed and recorded, were laid out in the observation protocol (Appendix B). Undergraduate students interviewed were asked a series of questions about their experience taking classes, their opinions of the class overall, their knowledge of trigger warnings, and their experience in the class as it directly relates to trigger warnings (see Appendix C for interview protocol). Interview questions for instructors included similar questions about their academic career, opinions on the class and trigger warnings, as well as questions about their teaching experience and experience with trigger warnings as a topic of discussion within their department, field, or institution. Interviews ranged from 12 to 25 minutes and were recorded then transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Data Analysis

After completing data collection, the researcher coded the interview transcriptions using grounded theory. The aim of grounded theory is to generate or discover a theory and this technique involves generating themes from the data itself (Saldaña, 2009). This technique is useful because the use of trigger warnings in college classrooms is a fairly new phenomenon which has not been extensively researched. After an initial read of the interview transcriptions, the researcher developed a list of common themes which generated a coding scheme (Saldaña, 2009). This coding scheme was then applied again to the interview transcriptions and to the field notes. For example, when interviewees talked about feeling certain types of emotions related to their class experiences and/or trigger warnings, these emotions were coded into four categories: empathy, comfort, boredom, and anger. The researcher then used these codes to analyze the field notes for observations that also mentioned these emotions.

Researcher Positionality

This study serves as the master's thesis for the researcher's master of arts degree in organizational leadership, policy, and development with a focus in higher education. The researcher conducted this study while enrolled in a master's program. The researcher chose this topic because of a personal interest in trigger warnings and a belief that such strategies increase access for students with certain experiences. As a queer-identified woman, the researcher feels a strong connection to students who have trauma that can inhibit their ability to fully participate in higher education. Therefore, the researcher comes to this study with a positive view of trigger warnings which could affect the objectivity of this research. This is the second independent research study that this researcher has conducted and the first independent qualitative study. The researcher's

primary interests are in supporting non-traditional students and student-faculty interactions. This study was conducted under the advisory of a faculty member.

Limitations

Because the study conducted is a case study, possible limitations include the generalizability of the findings as well as the ability to transfer these findings to other situations. These findings relate to this specific classroom environment and have not been studied outside of this particular class. This study also only presents interview data from one full-time instructor, two graduate-level instructors, and five undergraduate students. Therefore, this study does not provide all possible opinions or methods of using trigger warnings in the classroom. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will serve as a place to begin further research into the use and consequences of trigger warnings in college classrooms.

This qualitative case study uses field notes from class observations and transcriptions of semi-structured interviews to examine the uses of and responses to trigger warnings in a college classroom. A coding scheme was generated from transcripts of interviews with students and was then applied to the transcripts of interviews with two teaching assistants and one faculty member. The coding scheme was also applied to field notes and themes were generated. Results from this data analysis are outlined in the following section.

Findings

By observing an introductory level gender studies class and conducting interviews with students, teaching assistants, and one faculty member, this study examines the use and implications of trigger warnings. This study presents a number of important findings

that illuminate perspectives on the use of trigger warnings in the classroom. These findings have been divided into three categories: classroom experiences, history with trigger warnings, and views of trigger warnings.

Classroom Experiences

None of the interview participants expressed particularly strong emotions about the class experience overall. Three out of the five students interviewed mentioned taking the class because it met two general education requirements for their liberal arts degree. All students interviewed had some prior knowledge of gender studies but not all had previously taken a gender studies course. Students used phrases like “pretty good” and “it wasn’t bad” to describe their experience with the class. During classroom observations, the researcher saw an inconsistency in participation throughout the semester. Some classroom sessions involved participation from many students who shared personal connections to topics and asked questions about the information being presented to them.

However, during other classroom sessions there was little to no participation from the class, even at the prompting of the instructor who would frequently ask for class feedback. This lack of class participation was seen on class periods that ranged in topics. Except for one class meeting when a film was shown for the entire period, each class session involved the professor lecturing from PowerPoint for the duration of the class, with one or two intentional opportunities for students to ask questions or make comments on the material. Throughout the semester, the researcher observed no class lecture periods or discussion sections where every student was in attendance, classes and discussion sections were usually missing one or two students each session. The researcher observed students visibly disengaging from the lecture by talking to those around them, browsing

the internet, or falling asleep. The numbers of students visibly disengaging within one lecture period ranged from two to ten. Disengagement typically happened toward the end of the class periods, while videos were being shown, or while other students were making comments. This type of disengagement was rarely seen in discussion sections, possibly because the low number of students in the class meant that students' participation was more likely to be scrutinized by the teaching assistant.

In the class observed, the faculty member used trigger warnings sporadically throughout the semester. The faculty member gave trigger warnings verbally before some content but did not provide one before all content that could be traumatic. During interviews, 3 out of the 5 students expressed that this showed a lack of commitment to trigger warnings and made the trigger warnings less effective. One student recalled discussing forced sterilization in class and felt that a trigger warning should have been given before the class. Another common critique from students was the timing of trigger warnings. As observed by the researcher, the few times the instructor gave trigger warnings, they verbally gave the warning to the class and then immediately started addressing whatever topic had warranted that warning. Students interviewed expressed the need for more time so that students can decide what, if anything, they needed to do to be able to fully participate.

Although students had suggestions for improving the way trigger warnings were employed in the class, two students interviewed positively connected their experience in the class with the use of trigger warnings by the instructor. When asked if the use of trigger warnings affected their view of the professor, one student, Sam, commented:

...the teacher has sort of compassion. They are not just there because they are trying to fulfill a quota so they can do their research for the university. They aren't just there to talk at you, they are thinking about the students and they are thinking, 'I want to create a safe learning environment so everyone can actually learn to their fullest potential' and I respect when they do that.

Another student, Jessica, said:

It feels like the professor is looking out for his students. Like he isn't just there to show up, talk at us, and then leave. He actually looks out for students and is like, 'okay something I'm teaching might upset them and I don't want that, I want all my students to feel like they can talk to me about stuff or that they can participate in discussion. So it definitely makes me think highly of the teacher.

Earlier in their interviews, Sam and Jessica both remarked that they took the class because of an interest in the subject but that they did not completely enjoy the course. Both students felt that course was too 'surface-level' and that they did not learn as much as they wanted to. Both students had moderate participation in the class throughout the semester. These comments suggest that even though students were not enthusiastically engaged with the material or particularly impressed by the class overall, the use of trigger warnings by the instructor led these students to have a positive opinion of the professor that was separate from their opinions on the class. Overall, the participation and engagement with the course was moderate but students interviewed felt that the use of trigger warnings improved their perceptions of the instructor. Aside from classroom experiences, each interviewee discussed their knowledge of and history with trigger warnings.

History with Trigger Warnings

Each participant interviewed had some familiarity with the concept of trigger warnings and their use within academia. All of the students interviewed mentioned social media and other internet sites as the first place they encountered trigger warnings. Students referenced specific sites such as facebook.com and tumblr.com. Sam identified online fan fiction culture as the place where they first saw trigger warnings being used. This student also mentioned a past concept used in fan fiction communities that predated trigger warnings but served a similar purpose. Sam remarked, “there used to be an old term called a squib which is totally nonsense but that’s what it supposed to be. Squibs were supposed to let you know that there was uncomfortable content inside [the fan fiction]” and used cannibalism as an example of something that may be contained within a fan fiction writing that would warrant the use of this.

Instructors were also familiar with trigger warnings and credited social media for introducing them to this concept. Similar to students, they named facebook.com and tumblr.com as specific sites where trigger warnings are used. The faculty member recalled seeing trigger warnings on livejournal.com in the early 2000s. For all participants interviewed, social media played a critical role in their understandings of trigger warnings and how they are used.

Out of the five students interviewed, three students had previously been in a class where the instructor used some sort of warning before certain content was discussed. One participant, Dani, had a class that used trigger warnings at this same university, Jessica experienced this during a class at a local community college they attended before transferring to the institution under study, and another student, Elliot, experienced this in

high school. Elliot commented: “In high school there were a couple of times when a teacher would be like this book is graphic or this book is going to include rape so it was a trigger warning of sorts but not as official I guess.” This student recognized that their teacher was giving some intentional caution to students around classroom material but felt that this was more casual than a trigger warning because their teacher did not use that label. While every student knew what trigger warnings were, they had learned about them from various social media sites. Even though some of them had been in prior classes that used trigger warnings and all of them were in the observed class where the professor used trigger warnings, no instructor had ever explained what trigger warnings were and why they were using them.

Neither teaching assistant had ever been in a class that used trigger warnings nor had they given trigger warnings while serving as teaching assistants for other classes. They did not give trigger warnings in the discussions they led as they relied on the faculty member to give them during lectures. One teaching assistant had previously been a teaching assistant for a class where a student requested a trigger warning before content that dealt with sexual assault. The faculty member of the observed class, who has taught for over 10 years and called their teaching experience “extensive,” has used trigger warnings in two previous courses. They illuminated the need for trigger warnings in one particular class by saying:

Five years ago I was showing a film and I had seen the film many times before but I hadn't... I was too busy and I hadn't registered it, but there's a scene where a transgender person gets arrested and then really severely beaten up by the cops. And I just, I guess, I hadn't realized that I would have a really intense response

but then I was like, okay I'm sorry everybody I should have warned you about this. I don't think the students in that class were actually... they didn't have the language, the language wasn't circulating then, to talk about how they should have had a trigger warning but the next time I taught that film I did build one in.

This faculty member referenced their own teaching experience as one of things that helped them realize that they needed to incorporate trigger warnings into their curriculum. Each interviewee had some history with trigger warnings and understandings of how they are used. In addition to this, interviewees had distinct, personal views of trigger warnings both within and outside of academia.

Views of Trigger Warnings

All students interviewed had positive opinions on trigger warnings in the classroom. When talking about trigger warnings, students used phrases like “benefits everyone”, “helps students”, and “a small thing to do with a high impact” to demonstrate their positive views of the practice. Dani expanded on this by saying:

In my abnormal psychology class... the professor put on the syllabus a list of topics that were going to be discussed each class and, at least for me, I was able to see like okay this class we are going to talk about eating disorders and that is a sensitive subject for me so I took some time to prepare myself for that class and I told a friend that we were going to talk about it so that if I got upset I knew that after class I could call them and they, like they also have experience with it, so I could call them and they would support me.

This same student later remarked that trigger warnings help them “feel more comfortable and be able to participate.” Jessica mentioned that she requests a trigger warning for

mentions of sexual assault from her professors and in previous classes not receiving such a warning affected her attendance, engagement, and grade in the class. Two students made a point to acknowledge the ongoing controversy over the use of trigger warnings in the classroom; however, every student viewed trigger warnings in a positive way regardless of whether or not they personally needed trigger warnings before certain subjects.

Instructors expressed more nuanced views regarding the use of trigger warnings in the classroom. While all the instructors believed that trigger warnings should be used in the classroom, they expressed some concerns with the logistics of trigger warnings. One teaching assistant said, “The ways in which trigger warnings are discussed puts a big onus on the content providers.” The faculty member expressed specific concerns about the ways in which students ask for trigger warnings and how that affects instructors:

[Requests for trigger warnings in syllabi] put a tremendous amount of pressure on the instructor because they are expected not only to prepare a syllabus but to prepare a kind of tailored syllabus that is personally designed for every student. The people who get kind of asked of this are usually the feminist, queer faculty who are already kind of trying to be in students’ corner and support students. Students don’t approach like a biology classroom and say like, ‘oh my god my white, 70-year-old biology professor has to provide us with trigger warnings when we are talking about X because they already know that isn’t going to be something that the professors are familiar with. But queer faculty in a gender studies course they are like, ‘you should already know you should be providing trigger warnings’ and I think there’s really desire for the classroom to be a kind of

politically safe space in a way that institutions just aren't and don't have the capacity to be.

All students interviewed expressed positive views of trigger warnings and had expectations of trigger warnings in the classroom. Both students and instructors intentionally differentiated between students who are triggered in the classroom and students who may feel discomfort around certain topics. Four out of the five students interviewed explicitly remarked that trigger warnings do not allow students to disengage from class work. Instructors, while also expressing positive views of trigger warnings, expressed their own concerns about how they can respond to the increased pressure from students and the extra work providing trigger warnings adds to their already packed schedules.

Sam suggested that students and instructors should work together to determine which concepts should warrant a trigger warning. Similarly, one teaching assistant suggested that instructors and students find a more collaborative way to employ trigger warnings. The other teaching assistant suggested that instructors explain their reasoning for trigger warnings before giving them and ensure that students understand why warnings are given before certain content.

Discussion

These findings support some of the current literature around trigger warnings. Students viewed trigger warnings as one facet of making classrooms welcoming and engaging. They viewed trigger warnings as one way to help students participate and be successful in classes. Students felt that instructors who use trigger warnings are more invested in their students and care about how students are feeling in their class. These

comments echoed some of the recommended strategies for instructors looking to enact an engaged pedagogy, such as responding to student needs, seeing students as whole people with a variety of lived experiences, and recognizing that each student experiences the classroom differently based on their identities and backgrounds (Chahine, 2013).

In contrast to some of the current literature on trigger warnings, students did not view trigger warnings as coddling or diminishing their resilience. Disagreeing with Lukianoff and Haidt (2015), students also did not feel that classrooms were spaces where students should be intentionally triggered or otherwise exposed to situations that may damage their mental health. In fact, some students interviewed intentionally remarked that they had heard these arguments against trigger warnings and disagreed with them.

One student suggested that students and instructors should work together to determine which concepts should warrant a trigger warning. Similarly, one teaching assistant suggested that instructors and students find a more collaborative way to employ trigger warnings. They believe that the responsibility for providing these should be shared between instructor and student. One suggestion they had was giving students the syllabus before the class begins and letting students identify which topics they need trigger warnings for. This allows the instructor to then incorporate these trigger warnings during the semester without expecting the instructor to provide a trigger warning for every single topic covered by the class. The other teaching assistant suggested that instructors explain their reasoning for trigger warnings before giving them and ensure that students understand why warnings are given before certain content.

Neither students nor instructors placed the conversation of trigger warnings within the greater debate of academic freedom. Only the faculty member placed this issue within

a larger higher education debate, commenting that discussions of trigger warnings on campus usually fall within debates on campus climate. Both teaching assistants and three students specifically named trauma and mental health as one reason to use trigger warnings. The teaching assistants both mentioned students who are struggling with PTSD as one sub-set of students who may benefit from trigger warnings. This is similar to remarks made in current literature about the number of students with traumatic backgrounds, such as veterans and refugees, who are enrolling in higher education (Freidrich, 2014). The faculty member connected their use of trigger warnings with prior teaching experiences where they felt that students in the class may have been negatively affected by the content they were teaching. They named this experience, and the desire to mitigate some of those negative effects, as one of the main reasons they decided to start giving trigger warnings in their classes. From these interviews, it is clear that these students and instructors see trigger warnings within an inclusive classroom and harm reduction framework.

Implications

These findings show that some beliefs about trigger warnings are not actually seen in the classroom. It is important to illuminate the reality of how trigger warnings are used in the classroom and how these affect the experiences of students. No interviewees felt that trigger warnings coddled students, or provided them an excuse to not engage in the classroom. The faculty member did not feel like he could not teach certain topics because of requests for trigger warnings or that his academic freedom was being taken away. Because the views expressed by students and instructors contradict what some

people outside of the academy believe, the need for more research that shows how the reality of trigger warnings differs from what others believe is needed.

While all interviewees agreed that the use of trigger warnings in the classroom is important and fosters increased engagement, some also had critiques of how these trigger warnings are employed. Interviewees suggested that trigger warnings be explained more explicitly by instructors before being given so that students can understand why certain topics may need a trigger warning and be more sensitive to their peers. Interviewees also expressed the need for a more collaborative model to determine how and when trigger warnings are used. Such a model would take some of the responsibility off of the instructors and also allow students to make decisions regarding their classroom experiences. These collaborations could also foster a relationship between instructors and students early in the semester.

These suggestions could be a successful way to mitigate the concerns from faculty while also responding to student needs. The role of instructors and students in determining the use of trigger warnings in the classroom was a common theme across interviews and these suggestions address these concerns. Collaborations between instructors and students to determine the use of trigger warnings could be an initiative taken on by student government, faculty committees, or the administration. Current committees could collaborate to work on this issue or a new committee, made up of faculty and students, could be formed to determine protocol and set precedents for the use of trigger warnings in classrooms. Students and instructors could also collaborate within individual classrooms to determine how trigger warnings should be used in that space.

Finally, it is clear in this study that instructors who use trigger warnings are viewed positively by their students. Instructors who truly wish to respond to student needs should consider using trigger warnings as one strategy for incorporating responses to such needs into their class curriculum. The faculty member in this study who used trigger warnings, even though their method was imperfect, was viewed as engaged, caring, and approachable. This impact on the instructor-student relationship that can be a result of trigger warnings, as well as other findings from this study, should be shared widely so that instructors can make more informed decisions regarding the use of trigger warnings in their classrooms.

Conclusion

This case study followed the use of trigger warnings in a gender studies classroom at a large, public university in the Midwest. Trigger warnings were understood to be any information given, either verbal or in writing, that tells students ahead of time about particular content that the instructor will be addressing in class and could be seen as sensitive by the instructor or by the students. Trigger warnings were placed into larger discussions on personal freedoms, inclusive classrooms, and harm reduction.

Five students, two teaching assistants, and one faculty member were interviewed about their opinions on trigger warnings and their experiences in the class centered in this case study. The researcher also observed class meetings, transcribed interviews verbatim, and developed a coding scheme that was then applied to the field notes to find evidence supporting these themes. Findings were organized into four categories: classroom experiences, history with trigger warnings, views of trigger warnings, and suggestions for moving forward.

Important findings from this study include the overwhelming support of trigger warnings by students and the similar support of trigger warnings by instructors. Additionally, instructors who use trigger warnings are viewed favorably by students. Implications include the need for more student-instructor collaboration to determine which subjects need trigger warnings and the need for instructors to explicitly explain their reasoning for giving trigger warnings in classes before they give them.

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Appendix A

INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH

Trigger Warnings in the Classroom

You are invited to be in a research study of how students and instructors experience sensitive consent and trigger warnings in the classroom. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a student or instructor of GWSS 1003, Skin Sex and Genes.

We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Emily Horton, Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development

Procedures:

Instructors and students will be asked to participate in an hour-long interview with researcher, but doing so is optional and not required, Minimum participation in this study involves being observed while in class.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Tape

recordings of interviews will be used only by the researcher for data analysis purpose and will be erased after project is completed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or your outcomes in this class. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Emily Horton. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them at 214-709-4324 or hort0187@umn.edu. You may also contact their advisor, Tania Mitchell at tmitchel@umn.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix B

Observation Protocol – Trigger Warnings in the Classroom

In this study, the researcher will observe students and teacher during class periods.

Observations made will include but are not limited to the following classroom behaviors:

- Levels of engagement with course content
 - This will be observed continuously throughout the course and levels of engagement in different class periods will be compared to each other. Class attendance will also be monitored. Levels of engagement will be observed through indicators such as overall participation, number of students participating in lecture, and non-verbal indicators such as slouching, sleeping, doodling, note-taking, and day-dreaming.
- Interpersonal interactions
 - Interactions between instructor and students, and amongst students will be observed. Interactions can include class discussions, small group activities, and other conversations held during class time.
- Teaching strategies employed
 - Teaching strategies such as lecture format, class activities, diversions from syllabus, and use of personal narratives will be observed. Teaching strategies on different days and with different content will be compared.
- Speed of content delivery by teacher
 - Speed of delivery by instructor may be indicative of instructor's comfort with course topics and of student engagement/interest in topic
- Comfort with course topics

- Perceived comfort amongst students and instructors with course topics will be observed through non-verbal or verbal communication and through levels of engagement
- Use of personal narratives
 - Use of personal narratives will be observed to grasp student and instructor comfort or experience with given topics. Content of personal narratives will not be documented.
- Student seating arrangements
 - Seating arrangements can be indicative of student relations in the classroom and comfort in class.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Student Questions

1. What is your name?
2. How long have you been a student at the University of Minnesota?
3. What do you study?
4. Why are you taking this class?
5. What is your experience with the class so far?
6. Have you ever heard of trigger warnings, sometimes also called content warnings?
 - 6a. Where/when have you heard of these?
7. What is your understanding of what trigger warnings are and how they are used?
8. Have you ever been in a classroom where trigger warnings were used before this class?
9. Have you ever been in a situation where you would have wanted a trigger warning?
10. Have you ever discussed trigger warning with any of your peers?
11. Tell me about your experience in this class as it pertains to trigger warnings.
12. Is there anything else you want to tell me about trigger warnings?

Instructor Questions

1. What is your name?
2. What is your role at the University of Minnesota?

3. How long have you been an instructor at the University of Minnesota?
4. How many classes have you taught here or at any other institutions?
5. Why are you teaching this class?
6. What is your experience with the class so far?
7. Have you ever heard of trigger warnings, sometimes also called content warnings?
 - 7a. Where/when have you heard of these?
8. What is your understanding of what trigger warnings are and how they are used?
9. Have you ever used trigger warnings in your classroom before this class?
10. Have you ever had a student request a trigger warning?
11. Have you ever discussed trigger warnings with any of your colleagues?
12. Tell me about your experience in this class as it pertains to trigger warnings.
13. Has your administration ever communicated anything about trigger warnings?
14. Is there anything else you want to tell me about trigger warnings?