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Trigger Warnings in Psychology Classrooms?: Comparing Sexes from a Diverse Religious Institution

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Abstract

Sensitive, oftentimes unsettling topics are inherent, especially in psychology education (Boysen et al., 2018). Prior notification - also known as trigger warnings - to help students prepare for, or avoid, possibly disturbing, upcoming education topics (Boysen, 2017, p. 164) are being pushed for by college students on potentially disturbing content. We previously replication Guy A. Boysen's "Trigger Warnings in psychology Classes: What Do Students Think?" and found that students from a diverse, religious institution had few significant differences, but, in general, the results from the two data sets were quite similar (Kim et al, 2020). To expand on this knowledge, we compared the results of the different sexes within our sample by using an independent samples t-test to examine whether they are significantly different in rating the appropriateness of sensitive topics and warnings thereof in psychology classrooms. Of the 16 sensitive topics indicated in the questionnaire - sexual assault, child abuse, suicide, racial issues, self-harm, sexism, violence/trauma, eating disorders, religious issues, human sexuality, psychological symptoms, sexual orientation, stigma, social class, physical disability, and substance abuse - 10 were significantly different between the sexes. Females reported higher

discomfort in all 16 sensitive topics, indicating more distress. Implications for informed preventions for various stakeholders, such as schools will be discussed.

Keywords: Trigger Warning, Sex, Sensitive Topics, Psychology, Education.

Literature Review

Trigger warnings are the prior notification that a sensitive topic is going to occur which then allows an individual to “psychologically” prepare for or avoid their discussion (Boysen et al., 2018). As such sensitive topics are an inherent part of the education received by psychology majors and minors, students are now pushing for the utilization of trigger warnings by their instructors (Boysen et al., 2018; Smith, 2014).

In our previous study (2020), majority of psychology students nationwide commended the use of trigger warnings in their psychology courses, but the level of discomfort from the topics taught in classes were low (Boysen et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020). However, we found that our sample and the representative national sample rated five of the same topics as the most distressing - sexual assault, child abuse, suicide, self-harm, and violence/trauma (Kim et al., 2020). Which fueled our interest to examine whether there was a vocal minority group experiencing more or extreme discomfort therefore pushing for the issuance of trigger warnings.

Currently there is an absence of scholarly work pertaining to the necessity of and attitudes towards trigger warnings (Kim et al., 2020). Even more scarce is the extant literature on the differences in sensitivity/distress ratings between the sexes on this topic. Are there any differences in the sensitivity ratings to various distressing topics between the sexes? Should

these differences change how instructors judge the amount of distress a given topic might cause for students? Is there a vocal minority advocating for such change that needs to be addressed? Is the vocal minority within a specific sex? Questions such as these and more needed answers.

Although there is a lack of scholarly work looking at the perspective of sexes on their attitudes towards trigger warnings, there are literature that supports one sex may be significantly more distressed with the 16 different sensitive topics taught in psychology courses. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 5 women compared to 1 in 71 men in the United States has been raped in their life time (CDC, 2015). Breslau and colleagues (2007) found that from a representative sample of 1,698 young adults in a large U.S city, women's risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following assaultive violence was higher than men's. In addition, when assaultive violence preceded a later nonassaultive trauma in women, there was an increased risk for PTSD, which was not observed in men (Breslau & Anthony, 2007). Furthermore, anxiety sensitivity appeared more strongly (positively) related to posttraumatic stress symptoms during the follow up period among females than males in Feldner and colleagues study (2008).

The current study aims to expand on this previous body of work by comparing sexes within our sample in order to examine whether there is a significant difference in their ratings on the appropriateness of sensitive topics and warnings thereof in psychology courses. An independent samples t-test will be used to compare each of the 16 sensitive topics between males and females within our sample. The current study hypothesizes that there will be significant differences between males and females on the 16 different sensitive topics.

Methodology

Participants

Sampling Procedures. Undergraduate psychology majors and minors were recruited during the fall of 2019. Recruitment took place via various methods, such as psychology classes, direct invitation, and emails. Students recruited during psychology classes were given hard copies of the survey and those participating outside of the classroom were given an identical computerized version. Out of the possible 94 undergraduate psychology majors and minors, 92 students attempted the survey, but only 78 respondents provided useable data. Of the 78 respondents, 85% were psychology majors and the remainders were minors. All the 14 excluded cases were those who failed to complete the survey. Incomplete surveys occurred only on the online version where respondents started but quit before it was completed.

Demographics. Due to the nature of the current study being a continuation of Kim and colleagues' study (2020), the demographics have stayed consistent:

Participants in our study were undergraduate psychology majors or minors attending a private religiously affiliated university in the Midwest region of the United States. Participants were primarily female over the age of 18 (75%). Participants reported their racial/ethnic identity as European American (33%), African American (28%), Hispanic/Latinx American (21%), International (19%), Asian American (14%), Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander American (4%), and Middle Eastern American (1%). In regards to their primary sexual orientation, 69% reported identifying as heterosexual, 15% as asexual, 10% as bisexual, 4% as other, and 1% as fluid. Participants self-reported their family annual household income which was categorized as followed: Extreme upper class, \$500K or more (0%); Upper class, \$100K - \$499K (23%); Middle class, \$50K - \$99K (54%); Working class, \$30K - \$49K (13%); Impoverished, 29K or lower and/or received food stamps, medical, and housing assistance for several years (10%). Participants reported their religious affiliations as Seventh Day Adventist (80%), other (13%) and no religious beliefs (8%). As noted earlier, the university is religiously affiliated. (p. 245-246)

Academic Information. Similarly, to *demographics* the *academic information* has no updates to be mentioned. The data used in the current study is the same data set of the previous study done by Kim and colleagues (2020):

The majority of the participants were psychology majors (85%), and the remainder of the sample were psychology minors. Participants reported their academic status as freshman (12%), sophomore (32%), junior (23%), and senior (33%). Participants reported taking an average of eight psychology courses ($SD = 14.2$; Mode = 2), past and present, at the time of sampling. Categorically, freshmen took an average of 2.2 psychology courses ($SD = 1$; Mode = 2); sophomores took an average of 4 psychology courses ($SD = 2.2$; Mode = 4); juniors took an average of 6.1 psychology courses ($SD = 2.7$; Mode = 6.5); and seniors took an average of 11.4 psychology courses ($SD = 4.9$; Mode = 12). (p. 246)

Measures

The survey in the current and previous study (Kim et al., 2020) was a duplicate to Boysen's (2018) questionnaire, used in "Trigger Warnings in Psychology Classes: What Do Students Think?". Undergraduate psychology majors and minors who participated in our study (Kim et al., 2020) had the option to partake through an online or hard copy version of the survey aforementioned. The only difference between Boysen's and our study was in the demographic section where we altered the *religious affiliation* question to match our sample – added Seventh Day Adventist. The survey began with demographic questions (e.g.: age, sex, religious affiliation, and etc.) and participants self-reported the number of current and past psychology courses they had taken at the time of taking the survey. Participants then reported their opinions on the general use of trigger warnings in psychology courses – the number of psychology courses in which they had received such warnings, and the ways in which instructors conveyed such warnings (Kim et al., 2020). Respondents then rated the level of discomfort they personally felt/experienced pertaining to 16 different topics generally covered

in psychology courses (see table 1) (Kim et al., 2020). Then participants reported on whether trigger warnings were necessary for the same 16 topics covered in psychology courses as part of the course content or class discussion and whether a trigger was issued by the instructor for any of the 16 topics (Kim et al., 2020). Participants also reported their maximum level of discomfort or distress personally felt during the most disturbing topic covered during their psychology classes – how much this distress affected/disrupted their learning and for how long (Kim et al., 2020). Lastly, respondents rated their level of agreement with several statements pertaining to sensitive topics in psychology and the role of students and instructors in relation to those topics (see table 3) (Kim et al., 2020). Table 3 in the current study was rated in the same manner as Boysen et al., (2018) and Kim et al., (2020):

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. (p. 74)

As the purpose of this paper was to compare the sexes within our sample, an independent t-test was used to compare the means.

Results

General Attitudes and Experiences with Trigger Warnings

Undergraduate psychology majors and minors were asked the number of psychology courses in which their instructors had issued a trigger warning (Kim et al., 2020). The definition of *trigger warning* was provided in earlier items in order to create a baseline of the concept of trigger warnings (Kim et al., 2020). On these items, 78% of the participants reported that a trigger warning was issued by their instructor in an average of 6.7 psychology courses ($SD = 4.8$; Mode = 2). The psychology courses taken at each level are: freshmen, 2.2 courses; sophomores 4; juniors, 6.1; and seniors 11.4 (Kim et al., 2020).

Participants were asked when the instructor made the trigger warning when dealing with sensitive topics. From the five possible choices, females most frequently reported “when sensitive topics arose in class, brought up by either students or instructors” (73%), “during the first day of class” (39%), “It was written in the course syllabus” (32%), “when the instructor made aware that students privately reported that they felt discomfort after a discussion over a topic” (9%), and “when students seemed to show or outright mentioned in class, feeling discomfort during discussion of a topic” (4%). Using the same sequencing of answers, males reported “when sensitive topics arose” (42%), “during the first day of class” (68%), “written in syllabus” (26%), “privately reported by students” (5%), and “outright mentioned in class” (5%). The biggest differences can be found between “brought up or arose by students or instructor” and “during the first day of class” for males and females.

Reactions to Topics and Trigger Warnings

Participants rated the level of discomfort they have personally felt/experienced pertaining to 16 different topics covered in their psychology courses (see table 1) (Kim et al., 2020). Of the 16 topics 10 showed statistically significant differences, sexual assault ($t = -3.91$, p

< .001), child abuse ($t = -2.66, p < .01$), suicide ($t = -2.48, p < .01$) racial issues ($t = -2.83, p < .001$), self-harm ($t = -2.83, p < .01$), violent/trauma ($t = -2.61, p < .01$), eating disorders ($t = -3.16, p < .01$), religious issues ($t = -2.13, p < .05$) psychiatric symptoms ($t = -2.30, p < .05$) and substance abuse ($t = -2.03, p < .05$). In all cases the means for females were higher than males, which indicated more distress. Cohen's effect size value was medium to large for all 10 variables (sexual assault, $d = .90$; child abuse, $d = .63$; suicide, $d = .70$; racial issues, $d = .82$; self-harm, $d = .68$; violent/trauma, $d = .72$; eating disorders, $d = .70$; religious issues, $d = .60$; psychiatric symptoms, $d = .58$; substance abuse, $d = .47$), suggesting that the different type of samples used did have a substantial effect.

Participants also provided their opinions on the necessity of trigger warnings and whether such warnings were issued by their instructors for each topic. Results for each of the 16 topics for males and females can be found in table 2. While the rankings were not the same, both groups had sexual assault, child abuse, suicide, self-harm and eating disorders within the top six topics under "necessary and issued". Furthermore, four of the five topics were also rated the top 5 distressing topics - sexual assault, child abuse, suicide and self-harm (see table 1).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the difference between males and females on their distress ratings for 16 different sensitive topics taught in their psychology courses. This study was a continuation of investigation on our previous study that aimed to expand the knowledge of psychology students' perspectives of sensitive topics and of trigger warnings by replicating Boysen and colleagues research at a culturally diverse, religious

institution (Kim et al., 2020). In the previous study we found that, although Boysen suggested that religious colleges and individuals with culturally diverse demographics may find the topics more distressing, the results from the two data sets were quite similar (Kim et al., 2020). These results suggested that psychology students from a culturally diverse and religiously affiliated university were not more inclined to favor trigger warnings in relation to disturbing content compared to public institutions (Kim et al., 2020).

Table 1 deals with the discomfort levels participants felt/experienced when the 16 different sensitive topics arose in their psychology courses. When using an independent samples t-test 10 of the 16 sensitive topics had significant differences between males and females, with medium to large effect sizes. However, it should be noted that the mode in both groups on all topics was 1, which indicates “no discomfort”. Although the level of overall distress was low for both groups, the two groups found were similar in finding some topics as the most distressing topics - sexual assault, child abuse and suicide. Furthermore, in the “*an extreme amount*” only females were found with percentage ratings, suggesting that females experienced more distress at *an extreme amount* compared to males for some of the 16 sensitive topics - sexual assault, child abuse, suicide, racial issues, self-harm, violence/trauma, eating disorders, religious issues, and human sexuality. This also suggests that females within our sample may be a vocal minority pushing for the utilization of trigger warnings.

Table 2 showed how participants reported on the necessity and issuance of trigger warnings by topic. The largest differences between males and females on the “necessary and issued” column were religious issues (20%), suicide (17%), child abuse (13%), sexual assault (12%), and human sexuality (10%). It is interesting to note that although suicide, child abuse

and sexual assault show some of the largest percentage differences between males and females, they are all still amongst the top 5 most distressing (see table 1) and most reported as “necessary and issued” (see table 2). Furthermore, we find that the most 5 most distressing topics in our current study - sexual assault, child abuse, suicide, self-harm and eating disorders - are consistent with the top four most distressing topics within our previous study - sexual assault, child abuse, suicide, and self-harm (Kim et al., 2020).

Limitations

The current study was conducted at a one denominationally run university and therefore difficult to know how representative our findings are within the denomination, across other religious or mission driven universities and public institutions across the nation. Our sample size for males was small (N = 19) compared to the female sample (N = 56), so our findings may be considered as a preliminary study. In addition, the psychology department is fairly small with only four full time psychology professors and levels of administering trigger warnings were not analyzed for the current study.

Conclusion

Females within our religious and diverse institution reported significantly more distress in 10 topics compared to males. But our sample as a whole did not differ much from the national sample.

It is possible that students entering psychology already expect to be exposed to these types of topics and therefore are not as bothered by them as others might expect. Data from this study, Boysen and colleagues (2018) as well as Sanson and colleagues (2019) suggest that students are overall not rating their level of discomfort as high. In fact, both Boysen’s and our data show the mode to be a “1” (no discomfort) on all measured topics. Regarding college students increasing anxiety, Sanson and colleagues (2019) noted the “widespread adoption of trigger warnings in syllabi may promote this trend, tacitly encouraging students to turn to avoidance, thereby depriving them of opportunities to learn healthier ways” (p. 791) (Kim et al., 2020).

We recommend an attempt to replicate our results within various departments who

have explored trigger warnings and investigate whether there is a difference between males and females within their own data.

Tables

TABLE 1 Student Attitudes and Discomfort Ratings by Topic Areas

Topic	M(SD)	t	1	2	3	4	5
Sexual assault	1.58(.84) <i>2.64(1.45)</i>	-3.91***	58% 32%	32% 18%	5% 16%	5% 21%	0% 13%
Child abuse	1.68(.89) <i>2.41(1.37)</i>	-2.66**	52% 38%	32% 16%	11% 25%	5% 11%	0% 11%
Suicide	1.42(.90) <i>2.14(1.15)</i>	-2.48*	79% 38%	5% 29%	11% 20%	5% 11%	0% 4%
Racial issues	1.37(.68) <i>2.07(1.01)</i>	-2.83**	74% 34%	16% 36%	11% 21%	0% 7%	0% 2%
Self-harm	1.32(.82) <i>2.02(1.21)</i>	-2.83**	84% 46%	5% 25%	5% 14%	5% 9%	0% 5%
Sexism	1.58(.90) <i>1.91(.94)</i>	-1.34	63% 41%	21% 34%	11% 18%	5% 7%	0% 0%
Violence/trauma	1.32(.82) <i>1.96(.97)</i>	-2.61**	84% 41%	5% 27%	5% 29%	5% 2%	0% 12%
Eating disorders	1.21(.54) <i>1.84(1.15)</i>	-3.16**	84% 56%	11% 18%	5% 15%	0% 7%	0% 4%
Religious issues	1.26(.81) <i>1.80(.99)</i>	-2.13*	89% 48%	0% 32%	5% 14%	5% 2%	0% 4%
Human sexuality	1.47(.90) <i>1.71(.97)</i>	-0.95	74% 55%	11% 25%	11% 14%	5% 4%	0% 2%
Psych. symptoms	1.26(.81) <i>1.79(.99)</i>	-2.30*	89% 54%	0% 21%	5% 18%	5% 7%	0% 0%
S. orient/gender	1.32(.95) <i>1.61(.93)</i>	-1.18	89% 63%	0% 21%	0% 9%	11% 7%	0% 0%
Stigma	1.37(.83) <i>1.64(.84)</i>	-1.24	79% 57%	11% 23%	5% 18%	5% 2%	0% 0%
Social class	1.26(.56) <i>1.50(.85)</i>	-1.38	79% 70%	16% 14%	5% 13%	0% 4%	0% 0%
Physical disability	1.21(.71) <i>1.50(.83)</i>	-1.46	89% 70%	5% 13%	0% 16%	5% 2%	0% 0%
Substance abuse	1.11(.46) <i>1.41(.80)</i>	-2.03*	95% 75%	0% 13%	2% 9%	0% 4%	0% 0%

Note. The scaled ranged from 1(no discomfort), 2 (small amount), 3 (moderate amount), 4 (large amount), to 5 (extreme amount). The italic numbers indicate the *female*. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 2 Student Ratings of Trigger Warning Necessity and Issuance by Topic Area

Topic	Necessary and issued	Necessary but not issued	Unnecessary but issued	Unnecessary and not issued
Sexual assault	58%	11%	5%	26%
	<i>70%</i>	<i>14%</i>	<i>0%</i>	<i>14%</i>
Child abuse	53%	11%	11%	26%
	<i>66%</i>	<i>9%</i>	<i>5%</i>	<i>20%</i>
Suicide	42%	11%	16%	32%
	<i>59%</i>	<i>20%</i>	<i>2%</i>	<i>13%</i>
Racial issues	26%	5%	11%	58%
	<i>46%</i>	<i>11%</i>	<i>9%</i>	<i>29%</i>
Self-harm	47%	5%	11%	37%
	<i>54%</i>	<i>16%</i>	<i>4%</i>	<i>18%</i>
Sexism	26%	5%	21%	42%
	<i>34%</i>	<i>5%</i>	<i>9%</i>	<i>50%</i>
Violence/trauma	42%	11%	0%	47%
	<i>43%</i>	<i>14%</i>	<i>2%</i>	<i>23%</i>
Eating disorders	42%	0%	11%	47%
	<i>49%</i>	<i>15%</i>	<i>0%</i>	<i>27%</i>
Religious issues	21%	2%	37%	37%
	<i>23%</i>	<i>13%</i>	<i>7%</i>	<i>52%</i>
Human sexuality	26%	5%	5%	58%
	<i>36%</i>	<i>9%</i>	<i>13%</i>	<i>29%</i>
Psych. symptoms	32%	0%	16%	53%
	<i>34%</i>	<i>16%</i>	<i>4%</i>	<i>36%</i>
S. orient/gender	32%	11%	11%	42%
	<i>39%</i>	<i>13%</i>	<i>9%</i>	<i>30%</i>
Stigma	42%	5%	5%	47%
	<i>41%</i>	<i>9%</i>	<i>5%</i>	<i>39%</i>
Social class	11%	0%	21%	68%
	<i>20%</i>	<i>7%</i>	<i>4%</i>	<i>52%</i>
Physical disability	32%	11%	11%	58%
	<i>27%</i>	<i>5%</i>	<i>2%</i>	<i>30%</i>
Substance abuse	37%	0%	0%	63%
	<i>36%</i>	<i>13%</i>	<i>2%</i>	<i>41%</i>

Note. The italic numbers represent females.

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