

***Trigger Warning: A Genealogical Account of the Linguistic Comprehension of
Recurring Trauma***

Contemporary gender politics, specifically the emergence of new words and concepts to illuminate previously unarticulated gender/power asymmetries, has been a source of both empowerment and ire among academics and laypeople alike. While many words have become revitalized and adopted fresh meanings, few have experienced the amount of circulation and attention like the word *triggered*. On the surface, the word is seemingly innocuous, even mechanistic, but further investigation will show that *triggered* has experienced rapid development with the aid of feminist movements and the advent of the internet. The goal of this paper is threefold: to present a definition and genealogy of the word *triggered*, demonstrate its significance and growth in gender politics, and investigate how the word opens up previously unknown discourses.

To move this discourse forward, it is necessary to make clear exactly what *triggered* means. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it (in its adjectival form) as “(of a response) caused by particular action, process, or situation,” and according to Dictionary.com, it is “anything, as an act or event, that serves as a stimulus and initiates or precipitates a reaction or series of reactions.” However, it is clear that these definitions lack any true specificity. To capture the essence of the desired connotation, one must (ironically) turn to Urban Dictionary, which defines *triggered* as:

An emotional/psychological reaction caused by something that somehow relates to an upsetting time or happening in someone's life. This reaction is often found to happen in war veterans, people suffering with PTSD, depression, and other mental disorders.

The concept of being triggered was originally associated with military members who experienced stimuli in civilian settings similar to those often found in combat settings, such as explosions, loud noises, and even news coverage of warfare, though the word did not gain traction (as a diagnosable phenomena) until the Vietnam era [4]. For many, triggering is intertwined with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) , and some of its strongest associations were formed with notions of military trauma. However, a more mature conception of trauma and triggering developed, accounting for incidents such as sexual assault, near death experiences, loss of a loved one, and other extreme events. Shell-shock and war neuroses entered into a new territory, moving from a historically masculine conception to a more androgynous one. Many feminist groups, specifically those catered towards victims of sexual assault, found benefits in the intelligibility of the concept. Both victims and those close to them could now ground seemingly irrational experiences in language with a psychological and sociological justification; not only do traumatic events cause severe and recurring stress in victims, but societal infrastructures can recreate triggering stimuli, inadvertently or otherwise.

As feminist movements and their legitimacies became more recognizable, communicative technology, namely the internet, became more accessible. Those suffering from PTSD and triggers could now share and discuss their experiences in person or online. It is common knowledge that information transmission is nearly instantaneous on the web, and soon the word migrated from private message boards to storyboards such as LiveJournal [4]. Websites such as LiveJournal function as tools for narrative sharing, activism, and creative expression, utilizing forms such as fan-fiction. It became courtesy to preface fan-fictions and stories with what one would now recognize as a trigger warning. These warnings were in place to inform readers that

select stories contained potentially upsetting content, usually about eating disorders, sexual violence, or mental illness [4].

As new forms of social media were created such as Facebook and Twitter, trigger warnings and their related stories became more accessible to mainstream media consumers, and potentially triggering content was spread to audiences far larger than in previous years. These larger audiences inevitably had great ideological variability. Unfortunately, the term originally grounded in medical and solidary communities has been weaponized, with individuals on and offline accusing those susceptible to triggers of being weak, fragile, or overly sensitive. Internet users on websites such as Reddit and 4chan created maelstroms of sexist hate, meme-ifying the word with the intent (subconscious or otherwise) to neutralize the term and delegitimize lived experiences of those affected by traumatic experiences. Interestingly, there have even been conflicts between military members and feminists, with veterans claiming that those who identify as trigger prone are appropriating the term and doing a disservice to those who served and experienced combat situations. Despite these conflicts, the word still gained momentum, eventually moving offline and into academic discourses.

College students who grew up steeped in social media (and almost certainly encountering trigger warnings) found that many critically acclaimed literary materials contained graphic and controversial content; as a result, some students and administrations requested that professors include trigger warnings for these works. For many of these books and movies, their oblique incision into provocative societal issues is what made them famous in the first place. While trigger warnings allowed media users to circumvent traumatic recollections of their experiences, their place in higher education has continually been up for debate. Many universities are

comfortable with providing trigger warnings in syllabi, but schools such as UChicago have explicitly denounced the practice, claiming that it interferes with authentic exploration of academic materials [5].

While trigger warnings may be contentious in academic settings, there are numerous advantages to their use as well as the use of the term *trigger*. In the book *Epistemic Injustice*, philosopher Miranda Fricker details accounts of workplace women meeting and sharing their experiences of mistreatment, though they had not found a unifying term to describe the phenomena. As a result, the phrase *sexual harassment* was coined, which not only paved the way for social and legal recourse, but allowed society at large to make sense of a concept previously inaccessible to them. Similarly, dialogues surrounding trigger warnings provide platforms for discussion about issues of traumatic experience, thus raising awareness of the issue for supporters and dissenters alike. It is not unreasonable to predict that the word *trigger* might be reclaimed from its detractors in ways that words like *queer* have been by LGBTQ+ groups. A reintroduction may seem redundant, but a more articulate execution of the word may combat the media saturation that trigger warnings have fallen victim to.

As demonstrated in this paper, mechanical words under the correct circumstances can cause unprecedented social change, whether it be by conceptual awakening via linguistics or having a unifying label to work under. Furthermore, words like *trigger* and *trigger warning* can take seemingly disparate people and things such as war and feminism and stitch them together by identifying similar phenomenological experiences.

Investigate a nascent form of gender politics and then explain how it is similar and/or different from previous political formations/ideas. Think further about how politics and their terminologies are always in flux. Your essay should have some kind of central term and/or

behavior at its core. The paper should define what this term and/or behavior is. Present an extended example to demonstrate the concept/behavior, and then meditate on how it is new and/or an extension of previous gender politics. Be reflexive about the newness and/or distinctiveness of this concept/behavior from previous iterations of identity/action. What does this vocabulary or perspective offer us that is new or different AND what are some of its possible effects.

examine definition/etymology of the word *trigger*.

describe history of triggers in relation to PTSD.

Mention triggers in relation to non-military trauma.

Note the word's emergence in online forums.

Discuss its immersion into the mainstream and its subsequent ironic use.

Note the word's movement back into offline settings.

Discuss its contentions in academic settings.

The concept of triggering as understood today has a unique genealogy.

The concept arguably has a history of masculinity (due to its military origins)

The contemporary form of the concept has unique ties to feminism

"The trouble with PTSD, though, is that its triggers are often unpredictable and individually specific – a certain smell, a particular song, being touched in that one way. It's impossible to account for all of them, because triggers are by their nature not particularly rational or universally foreseeable." -The Guardian article

"[College is] not a place that contracts to meet the student exactly where they are." -guardian article

"It's perfectly reasonable for a survivor of violence to ask a professor for a heads up if the reading list includes a piece with graphic descriptions of rape or violence, for example. But generalized trigger warnings aren't so much about helping people with PTSD as they are about a certain kind of performative feminism: they're a low-stakes way to use the right language to identify yourself as conscious of social justice issues. Even better is demanding a trigger warning – that identifies you as even more aware, even more feminist, even more solicitous than the person who failed to adequately provide such a warning." -The Guardian

"On its face, that sounds fine (except for students who hate literary spoilers). But a trigger warning for what Oberlin identified as the book's common triggers – racism, colonialism,

religious persecution, violence, suicide (and more!) – sets the tone for reading and understanding the book. It skews students' perceptions. It highlights particular issues as necessarily more upsetting than others, and directs students to focus on particular themes that have been singled out by the professor as traumatic.” -Guardian

“Trigger warnings don't just warn students of potentially triggering material; they effectively shut down particular lines of discussion with ‘that's triggering’.” -Guardian

The weaponization of a word such a trigger runs the risk of negating critical thinking on contentious issues and also inaccurately conflates any form of dissent, no matter how well thought out, with bigotry.

“That the warnings hinge on topics that are more likely to affect the lives of marginalized groups contributes to the general perception of members of those groups as weak, vulnerable and ‘other’.” -Guardian

“Trigger warnings imply that our experiences are so unusual the pages detailing our lives can only be turned while wearing kid gloves.” -Guardian

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/triggered> (definition 1.1)

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/triggered> (definition 3)

https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Triggered&utm_source=search-action (definition 3)

https://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonvingiano/how-the-trigger-warning-took-over-the-internet?utm_term=.ilb7o4XO5#.jbXWRdnGm buzzfeed news.

<https://www.npr.org/2016/08/26/491531869/university-of-chicago-tells-freshmen-it-does-not-support-trigger-warnings>