Trigger Warnings in Context: The Role of Institutional Betrayal in the Trigger Warning Debate

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Abstract

The Problem: Trigger warnings (TWs) are alerts before media signaling readers that upcoming material may serve as trauma reminders. In the context of campus sexual assault, some undergraduates have advocated for TWs in classrooms, which has led to polarized debate. As one of few empirical investigations into the issues, the present study explored predictors of TW advocacy that reflect presumed or hypothesized motivations for advocacy reflected in the debate.

Method: Participants ($n = 51$) were traditional undergraduates who completed measures of TW attitudes, trait-like avoidance, posttraumatic stress, and institutional betrayal.

Results: Results of a hierarchical linear regression revealed that institutional betrayal emerged as the only significant predictor among these factors ($p = .023$).

Conclusions: The finding improves understanding of the context, potential motivations, future directions of investigation, and represents one of first few empirical contributions to the TW debate. It supports the conclusion that many students requesting TWs in classrooms are motivated, in part, by the belief that their educational institution has not proven trustworthy in valuing their safety and emotional wellbeing.

Trigger Warnings in Context: The Role of Institutional Betrayal in the Trigger Warning Debate

Trigger warnings (TWs) are alerts before presented media signaling consumers that upcoming material may be disturbing (Boysen et al., 2018). They warn particularly those with posttraumatic concerns or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of potential trauma reminders (McNally, 2014). TWs originate from feminist support group websites for sexual abuse survivors (Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015). Students have since requested institutions of higher education to integrate TWs into classrooms, sparking debate and a call for empirical study about whether these warnings are helpful or harmful (Jones, Bellet, & McNally, 2019).

Avoidance and Posttraumatic Stress

Advocates of classroom TWs assert that they empower students with control over how and when to engage potentially upsetting material (Carter, 2015). More psychology undergraduates than not have voiced support for classroom TWs (Boysen et al., 2018), and it has been argued that providing TWs can indirectly convey that professors, administrators, and institutions care for students' wellbeing (Carter, 2015; Harper, 2017).

Others have voiced concern that TWs could engender a fearful and avoidant approach to media that may inadvertently maintain posttraumatic vulnerabilities, interfere with academic performance, or reduce resiliency in trauma-naïve users of them (Bellet, Jones, & McNally, 2018). This perspective cautions that TWs may create negative expectancies in which students appraise upcoming material as more threatening than if the warning was absent (e.g., a nocebo effect). The few empirical studies of these issues have focused on the consequences of TW use and concluded that, so far, they have proven to be functionally inert (Jones et al., 2019), induce some nuanced distress (Bellet et al., 2018, Bruce, O'Brien, & Hoffman, 2017), or cause task interference (Bruce & Roberts, in press). For example, Bellet et al. (2018) found that trauma-

naïve students who read violent passages with TWs reported more anxiety than a group that read the same material without a TW, but only if they believed that words could cause harm. Bruce et al. (2017) found that TWs produced more sympathetic nervous system reactivity than other warnings. Bruce and Roberts (in press) found a mild but statistically significant impairment in reading comprehension in a trigger-warned group compared to an unwarned group. Results from this inceptive literature support concerns that TWs may have no functional effect or effects counter to their intended benefit. Yet, studies are few, and further research is needed.

Feminist Roots

While examination of the effects of TW use may help inform decisions regarding implementation, there is also value in understanding the context from which they arose and why educational institutions are the target of their advocacy. This examination begins in the feminist blogosphere, where TWs were first discussed (McNally, 2014, Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015).

Feminist theory has long noted inequitable social, economic, and political rights across different demographic groups and the psychological effects of these social forces (Espin, 1994). Support group websites where TWs first appeared reflected appreciation and sensitivity to these dynamics (Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015). Relevant to the TW discussion is how feminist theory conceptualizes traumatic memory retrieval from an ethical standpoint. Ethical principles of feminist psychotherapy convey that activation of trauma memories is potentially harmful, to be approached with caution, and controlled by the client. For example, Enns (1996) notes that, "if memory retrieval techniques overwhelm clients with information, feelings, and images that they are not yet prepared to confront and work through, the client's boundaries have been violated, and an abuse of power has occurred" (p. 86). TWs came out of this theoretical context. Bloggers

posting TWs before disclosing abuse memories were respecting others who may not be ready to activate their own memories (Carter, 2015).

Institutional Betrayal

From these origins TW advocacy moved to college campuses, often in relation to concerns over campus sexual assaults of which evidence suggests both a high prevalence and ineffective efforts to address them. Empirical estimates are that one in four cisgender women experience attempted or completed sexual assault during their undergraduate education (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2017). Concurrently, increasing numbers of colleges have been charged and found guilty by the Federal Office of Civil Rights for violating legal rights of survivors (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Charges have referenced unjust investigatory practices that perpetuate victim blaming and reflect misogynistic beliefs (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Examples included administrators and Title IX coordinators who "discriminated against [survivors] based on sex," "failed to afford a prompt and equitable grievance procedure," or "treated [survivors] with hostility" (p. 1; Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Research on college culture has found that many students accept rape myths that blame victims (McMahon, 2010), and many administrations provide little information about the grievance procedure, resources, or supports available (Lund & Thomas, 2015).

The psychological consequences of surviving trauma in this type of unsupportive, invalidating, or even hostile context is captured in the concept of institutional betrayal: the perceived violation of trust survivors may experience when an institution inadequately responds to a trauma they have experienced (Smith & Freyd, 2013). High institutional betrayal has been shown to exacerbate the negative consequences of sexual assault. For example, Smith and Freyd (2013) found that college women who experienced campus sexual assault and institutional

betrayal reported significantly higher levels of anxiety, trauma-specific sexual symptoms, and other negative outcomes over sexual assault victims not endorsing betrayal.

Having started on feminist support group websites as a means of respecting a survivor's right to control exposure to potential trauma cues, TWs are now being requested on college campuses, where sexual assaults are prevalent, institutions have been charged or found guilty of inadequate management, and some students endorse institutional betrayal. Yet to be tested, however, is if a TW advocacy and institutional betrayal correlate. Those warning against TW use have highlighted the potentially counter-therapeutic role of the fearful and avoidant approach they may reflect or engender. Although a few studies have begun to explore whether this approach is engendered, none have tested whether it is related to TW advocacy. The purpose of the present study is to subject these particular hypotheses to empirical study by testing whether posttraumatic fear and symptomatology, trait-like avoidance, or a sense of institutional betrayal emerge as predictors of positive TW attitudes and advocacy in students reporting a trauma history.

Method

Participants

Participants ($n = 51$) were undergraduate students recruited from a medium sized Midwestern United States university. This sample was derived from a parent sample ($N = 224$), such that it only included adult students endorsing a traumatic event history with subsequent institutional betrayal. The sample size provided enough power to detect large effect sizes ($f^2 = .35$) at the $\alpha = .05$ level for the planned analyses in this study ($1 - \beta$ error probability = .94). All were between the ages of 18-23 ($M = 18.96$, $SD = 1.07$). The majority were cisgender (86.4%; 11.3 % preferred not to say or did not respond; 2.3% were transgender), women (80.4%, 19.6%

men), and White (66.7%; 13.7% Latinx, 7.8% Black, 7.8% multiracial, 4.0% Asian). Participants

reported various traumatic experiences, including sudden death of a loved one (66.7%), direct

experience of sexual abuse (47.0%), as well as physical abuse (37.3%).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via emails on the department's recruitment system. Students

were told the study regarded "college student mental health." All participants affirmed consent

on a form approved by the university's institutional review board. Participants completed the

study measures, presented to them as follows, on Qualtrics survey software.

Measures

Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (Gámez et al., 2014). This questionnaire

is a measure of trait-like avoidance behaviors, such as distancing oneself cognitively or not

performing a task perceived as difficult. A sample item includes, "Pain always leads to

suffering." The scale contains 15 questions that subjects answer on a six-point Likert-type scale

ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. Cronbach's alpha results suggested

acceptable internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = .75$).

Trigger Warning Attitudes Survey (Bruce et al., 2017). TW attitudes were gauged

with a 9-item scale (see Table 1). This measure captures the extent to which participants believe

TWs should be implemented. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly

disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) with high scores interpreted as positive attitudes and advocacy.

Cronbach's alpha results suggested acceptable internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha =$

.76).

Trauma History Screen (THS; Carlson et al., 2005). The THS is a self-report measure

of exposure to high magnitude stressor events consistent with criterion A for the diagnosis of

PTSD in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Users are asked if they have experienced any of 14 events, including sexual abuse, military trauma, and others.

Posttraumatic Checklist-5 (PCL-5, Weathers et al., 2013). The PCL-5 is a 20-item measure of the presence and severity of PTSD symptoms within the previous month in accordance with DSM-5 criteria for the disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Each item is rated on 0-4 scale (0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*). An example item asks how bothersome, "Repeated, disturbing, and unwanted memories of the stressful experience" have been. Cronbach's alpha results suggested excellent internal consistency in this sample ($\alpha = .94$).

Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire. (IBQ, Smith & Freyd, 2013). The IBQ is a survey that assesses a participant's perception of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Participants affirm (1) or reject (0) 12 items regarding the institution's response to the trauma, such as asking if the institution, "Made it difficult to report the experience."

Data analysis plan

Data analysis was conducted on IBM SPSS Statistics Processor 23.0. Total scores of each scale were calculated using the sum of responses. We calculated correlations between all variables (see Table 2). We then ran a hierarchical linear regression. Step one tested avoidance. Step two added PTSD symptoms. Step three added institutional betrayal.

Results

The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at step one, avoidance did not contribute significantly to the regression model, $F(1, 49) = 0.00$, $p > .05$. Introducing the PTSD variable did not add accounted variance, and this change in R^2 was nonsignificant, $F(1, 48) = 0.00$, $p > .05$. Adding institutional betrayal to the model explained an additional 10.5% of the variation, and this change in R^2 was significant, $F(1, 47) = 5.52$, $p = .023$. When all three

independent variables were included at step three, neither avoidance nor PTSD were significant

predictors of TW advocacy. The only significant predictor in this model was institutional

betrayal, which uniquely explained 10.5% of variation. See Table 3 for all statistics.

Discussion

Results of the present study found that a sense of institutional betrayal was the only

significant predictor of TW advocacy among those tested. Although fear and avoidance have

been highlighted in the TW debate and literature as possible factors operating during TW use,

they did not emerge as predictors of positive attitudes or advocacy.

This result provides a context for the TW debate that could accommodate both sides of it.

First, it may be helpful to separate the issue of TW *advocacy* from TW *use*. Present results

suggest that TW advocacy may reflect, in part, attempts to address institutional betrayal. The

validity of this betrayal, given the data on sexual assaults and institutional mishandling, seems

supported in many cases. If one separates advocacy from use, the sense of social injustice that

may be prompting advocacy is arguably not where the differences of opinion are occurring.

Rather it is around the issue of whether TWs in use will operate as intended. This is arguably an

empirical question, and, as indicated previously, the few initial studies of it have suggested that

TWs may be functionally inert or have slight deleterious effects counter to their intent as an

academic accommodation. Clearly, more research is needed to answer questions regarding the

effects of TW use convincingly. However, even if using TWs proves deleterious, it would not

invalidate the argument that institutional betrayal is evident nor negate the recommendation that

it warrants addressing.

That said, another argument for TW use does not concern whether they are effective or

not, but rather whether receiving TWs should be valued as a personal right. From this

perspective, TW use is a request for personal control from an institution perceived as not respecting control as a right; not granting it would be construed as an abuse of power. McNally (2016) has argued that those at risk to respond aversively to trauma triggers should consider reducing this risk by engaging in an evidence-based treatment rather than through use of TWs. Although this recommendation could be construed as dismissive of the personal rights argument, these forms of treatment, in which the therapist and client proceed systematically through exposure to triggers, place control over the process in the hands of the client, not the therapist. Arguably, classroom exposure to triggers, even if warned, does not provide the student the degree of personal control that the therapy would especially given the inability to predict all triggers. In this sense, the recommendation for therapy respects students' right for control, provides more of it, and is likely to be most effective in promoting resiliency and posttraumatic growth given the evidence of its efficacy. It also does not dismiss the call for educational institutions to acknowledge, address, or prevent institutional betrayal. One action toward these ends would be for institutions to support and facilitate access to these evidence-based therapies.

Limitations of the study

Although institutional betrayal was a significant predictor of TW advocacy, it accounted for only a small amount of the model variance in what future research may find to be a multifactorial interaction. The present study did not intend to address the larger question of all possible predictors, only those prominent and polarizing in the debate. However, it can be argued that betrayal may be correlating with an unknown variable or variables that actually account for its variance. Until that is shown, however, we argue that its significance in this test is a warranted contribution to the TW debate and this inceptive literature. There may also be restrictions in the participant sample that limit generalizability of results to the relevant population. Specifically,

the sample was comprised of students self-reporting trauma. Although these students are involved in the TW debate, they may not represent all students on campuses that have experienced trauma (e.g., those not disclosing it, military veterans).

Conclusions

Research to date has found that TWs produce no or small deleterious effects (Bellet et al., 2018, Bruce et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2019). The present study found that institutional betrayal predicted advocacy of TWs over variables considered in the above studies. Results speak to the value of separating questions regarding TW advocacy, the effects of TW use, and how institutions can address both sets of issues. It was argued that supportively facilitating student access to evidence-based treatment is one example of such an action. There are likely more. Further research may benefit by approaching the TW issue from a multi-level and multi-factor perspective.

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Table 1

Trigger warning attitudes survey items

Item	M(*SD*)
I tend to use trigger warnings when they are posted.	2.88 *(1.23)*
If a Trigger Warning is administered, I take time to consider if I want to read/watch/listen to what follows.	3.20 *(1.41)*
Trigger Warnings are a good way to help me in class.	3.08 *(1.09)*
I would ask my professor to put Trigger Warnings on certain coursework.	2.63 *(1.33)*
Being "triggered" can ruin my ability to work.	2.96 *(1.47)*
I wouldn't advocate for trigger warnings. If they aren't there, I wouldn't ask for them.*	3.35 *(1.13)*
If a professor didn't give a trigger warning for class material that ended up being offensive, I would ask him/her to do so.	2.71 *(1.39)*
If a professor didn't give a Trigger Warning for class material that ended up being offensive, I would find him/her to be insensitive.	2.62 *(1.16)*
We should educate social media users about using Trigger Warnings with what they share.	3.76 *(1.24)*

Note. * denotes reverse scored item.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

Variable	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4
1. TWAS	51	27.19	6.74	13	40	-0.56	-0.43	-	-	-	-
2. BEAQ	51	51.94	7.87	31	71	-0.30	0.20	.03	-	-	-
3. PCL	51	38.10	18.84	4	74	-0.10	-0.81	-.01	.33*	-	-
4. IBQ	51	3.94	2.80	0	11	0.51	-0.30	.28	.06	.44**	-

Note. TWAS = Trigger Warning Attitudes Scale scores. BEAQ = Brief Experiential Avoidance

Questionnaire scores. PCL = Posttraumatic Checklist scores. IBQ = Institutional Betrayal

Questionnaire score. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting TW advocacy

Variable	β	t	R	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1			.00	.00	.00
BEAQ	.00	.01			
Step 2			.01	.00	.00
BEAQ	.01	.04			
PCL	-.01	-.09			
Step 3			.33*	.11*	.11*
BEAQ	.08	.49			
PCL	-.20	-1.19			
IBQ	.37*	2.35*			

Note. BEAQ = Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire scores. PCL = Posttraumatic

Checklist scores. IBQ = Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire score. * $p < .05$