TRIGGER WARNINGS FOR ABUSE IMPACT READING COMPREHENSION IN STUDENTS WITH HISTORIES OF ABUSE.

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Date: Summer 2020
From: College Student Journal(Vol. 54, Issue 2)
Publisher: Project Innovation (Alabama)
Document Type: Article
Length: 4,413 words

Abstract:

The Problem: Trigger warnings (TWs) are alerts before media informing consumers with posttraumatic vulnerabilities that upcoming themes may contain trauma reminders. Advocacy for classroom TWs has stirred controversy. We examined whether students with self-reported trauma histories would avoid reading TW-labeled articles, if TW utilization affected reading comprehension, and if congruence between the TW content and trauma type influenced these effects.

Method: Participants (A' = 208) were given the option of reading one of four similarly titled articles about The State of Michigan vs. Lawrence Nassar trial. Two of the four options had randomly assigned TWs stating, "trigger warning: sexual abuse." All participants then read the same article and completed measures of reading comprehension and posttraumatic stress.

Results: Results showed that students did not differ in their selection of TW-labeled and unlabeled articles. Students with a history of interpersonal violence, however, showed significantly poorer reading comprehension of a TW-labeled article than those who read the same article but denied such histories (p = .004).

Conclusions: Results did not support the concern that students may use TWs to avoid content but did support the concern that use of TWs may result in deleterious effects counter to their intended purpose.

Full Text:

Trigger warnings are alerts before presented media that warn people with posttraumatic vulnerabilities that upcoming content may trigger their traumatic memories (Boysen, 2016; McNally, 2014; Wilson, 2015). Trigger warnings first appeared in the 2000s on support group-like websites for women with histories of interpersonal violence (IPV) such as sexual assault (McNally, 2014; Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015). More recently, trigger warning requests have expanded to include undergraduate classroom content, leading to debate about whether they are likely to be helpful or harmful (Wilson, 2015).

Advocates of trigger warning use have described it as an academic accommodation for students with posttraumatic vulnerabilities and concerns, not unlike extended time on an exam for students with learning difficulties. The rationale is that they would empower and therefore benefit vulnerable individuals by allowing them control over how to interact with potentially disturbing content (Boysen, 2017; Carter, 2015). As noted by Bellet, Jones, and McNally (2018), justification for this position can be found in studies of perceived control and predictability on stress and anxiety. Examples include studies showing that perceived control over stressors reduces stress reactivity (Thompson, 1981), predictable stressors are less distressing than unpredictable ones (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013; Mineka & Kihlstrom, 1978), and distressing physiological sensations produce more anxiety when they are unexpected (Telch, Harrington, Smits, & Powers, 2011).

Others have voiced concern that trigger warning use may have unintended negative consequences such as maintaining posttraumatic vulnerabilities or reducing pre-trauma resiliency in trauma-naive individuals (Bellet et al., 2018; McNally, 2014). Risk that posttraumatic vulnerabilities may be maintained by trigger warnings is seen as high if their use leads to avoidance of "triggers." Overcoming avoidance of triggers is a primary aim of prolonged exposure, a well-established psychological treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that has been shown to reduce posttraumatic sequela (Institute of Medicine, 2008). Prolonged exposure therapy targets reversing avoidance by arranging and encouraging systematic exposure to conditioned triggers, eventually extinguishing reactivity to them. From this therapeutic model based on learning theory, a trigger warning may inadvertently support, rather than reduce, avoidance behavior by acting as a discriminative stimulus that cues avoidance behavior. Avoidance then perpetuates through negative reinforcement, precluding extinction, and thus maintaining posttraumatic vulnerabilities. Previous research has found avoidance of trigger-warning labeled article titles in a trauma-naive general sample (Gainsburg & Earl, 2018).

Concerns have also been expressed that trigger warnings may have deleterious effects even if users do not avoid the content (Bellet et al., 2018). These concerns find justification in studies examining the effects of warnings in general and the effects of negative expectancies. For example, the presence of salient alarms (e.g., "panic buttons") in an environment increases the perceived likelihood of potential emergencies (Orne & Scheibe, 1964). Studies of the nocebo effect have demonstrated that negative expectancies can produce counter-therapeutic effects (Enck, Benedetti, & Schedlowski, 2008). An example is seen when participants report more side-effects when told about them before taking a pill, despite the pill being inert (Barsky, Saintfort, Rogers, & Borus, 2002). These literatures support the hypothesis that trigger warnings may cue users to be selectively vigilant toward possible threats and at-risk for negative expectancies that could interfere with task performance. Circumstances in which the trigger warning content matches the user's personal trauma history may heighten this risk. For instance, "trigger warning: sexual abuse" may affect persons with prior sexual abuse history more than those with combat-related trauma histories.

Direct empirical study of these hypotheses is scant. In one of few studies to empirically examine the effects of trigger warnings, Bellet, Jones, and McNally (2018) explored whether their use before a reading task helped or harmed trauma-naive readers. Their results suggested harm to a select group of users. Specifically, participants exposed to trigger warnings who had previously endorsed the belief that "words can hurt," reported feeling more disturbed by the articles than those not exposed. They also reported higher levels of perceived vulnerability to emotional distress. The authors concluded that, "Trigger warnings do not appear to be conducive to resilience... [and] may present nuanced threats to selective domains of psychological resilience" (p. 25). Acknowledging that their study investigated pre-traumatic resilience in a sample of young adults who denied a trauma history, these authors called for further investigation of the effects of trigger warnings in college students reporting a trauma history, an audience they are intended to accommodate.

Given this background, a study investigating whether trigger warnings lead to avoidance of triggers by those with a trauma history appears warranted. It also warrants a study of whether trigger warnings interfere with task performance if the task is not avoided, and whether the match between trigger warning content and participants' trauma histories influence these potential outcomes. The present study investigates all three of these questions.

The Present Study

This study investigated the effects of trigger warnings on a reading task in student participants with and without self-reported trauma histories. Consistent with the concern that trigger warnings may prompt avoidance of content and thus potentially maintain posttraumatic vulnerabilities (McNally, 2014), we hypothesized that students, given the choice, would avoid trigger warning-labeled articles and instead select unlabeled articles. We also investigated whether posttraumatic vulnerability, defined by trauma history, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and the match between the content of the trigger warning and the participant's personal trauma, would be associated with avoidance if evident. Second, consistent with the concern that trigger warnings may have

deleterious effects on users who engage the content (Bellet et al., 2018; McNally, 2014), we tested whether reading comprehension would differ between trigger warning-labeled and unlabeled conditions and if so, whether it also would also be associated with posttraumatic vulnerability.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from a medium-sized Midwestern university (N = 212). This sample size provided sufficient power (1 - P error probability = .96) to detect a large effect size if = .40) for the planned analyses in this study. There were three participants who listed their age as 17 after agreeing to the consent form that stated they must be 18 to participate. While these participants were compensated for their time, data were excluded given the possibility that appropriate assent procedures were not conducted. A non-traditional student (aged 44) was also compensated but excluded from analysis due to outlying age. The final sample size was n = 208. All participants were undergraduate students aged 18-23 (M = 18.96, SD = 1.04). Most were White (71.6% White, 9.6% Black, 9.2% Latinx, 6.3% multiracial, 3.4% Asian, 1.0% not listed), cisgender (82.2% cisgender, 11.9% prefer not to say, 6.3% transgender) women (63.9% female, 18.3% male, 15.8% not listed or prefer not to say, 2.0% non-binary, agender, or genderfluid).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via emails to classes that provided extra credit for participation in research. The study was advertised as an online survey about "college student mental health." Before beginning, all participants consented through a form approved by the university's institutional review board.

The first page of the survey asked students to review a list of four article titles and select one to read. The titles were found on the National Public Radio (NPR) website and were selected based on their common theme of The State of Michigan vs. Lawrence Nassar sexual abuse trial (see Figure 1). This legal case against a former Michigan State

University sports medicine physician found guilty of sexually abusing hundreds of female athletes received heavy coverage in popular media at the time of the study. A trigger warning reading, "Trigger Warning: Sexual Abuse" appeared after the title on two of the four articles from which participants selected. To counterbalance trigger warnings and titles, the trigger warnings were randomly placed on titles such that they appeared on different titles for different participants.

All participants were then led to the same, similarly themed article (Pluta, 2018). The page with the article had the title that the participant selected at the top, but the content of the article was the same for all participants. After reading the article, participants completed the reading comprehension test (see Table 1). After completing this test, participants completed measures of posttraumatic vulnerability.

Measures and Materials

National Public Radio Article. The article, "Students, Alumni Watch as Michigan State Tries to Restore Its Reputation," was a transcript of an approximately four-minute clip from the radio station's "Morning Edition" (Pluta, 2018). The article was a 617word interview with a Michigan State trustee, an alumnus, and a crisis communications advisor with narration from Rick Pluta. The article, with highlights of the comments that informed the reading comprehension test, is included in the supplementary materials. Microsoft Word programing rated the reading level at grade 10.2.

Human Subjects Considerations. We chose materials with consideration to potential trauma histories of participants and followed guidelines for research from the American Psychological Association (APA) Division of Trauma Psychology (APA Division 56, n.d.).

The four article titles from which participants chose as well as the article all participants read were actual titles and a real article, respectively, from NPR. We sought ecological validity and did not

create materials that were especially vivid or noxious. Participants were provided contact information for help if they became distressed from the research procedure; however, no participants sought help from this contact.

Reading Comprehension Test. Because this measure tested content specific to a particular article, it was constructed for this study by a group of independent faculty with extensive academic test-writing training and experience. All questions were multiple choice: two with a single answer and one with multiple (three) correct answers. Scores could range from 1 to 5. Questions were framed around statements in the article that were physically offset for emphasis or were basic facts of the case described in the article. This reading test is included in Table I.

Trauma History Screen (THS). The THS is a brief self-report measure of exposure to high magnitude stressor (HMS) events and of events associated with significant and persistent posttraumatic distress (PPD). The measure assesses the frequency of HMS and PPD events and provides detailed information about PPD events. During its development, test-retest reliability proved good to excellent for items and trauma types and excellent for overall HMS and PPD scores (Carlson et al., 2011). Construct validity was supported by findings of strong convergent validity with a longer measure of trauma exposure and by correlations of HMS and PPD scores with PTSD symptoms (Carlson et al., 2011). The THS specifically asks users if they have experienced any of 14 traumas consistent with criterion A for the diagnosis of PTSD in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These traumatic events include physical and sexual abuse, severe car accidents, military trauma, and severe weather, among others.

Posttraumatic Check List - 5 (PCL-5). The PCL-5 (Weathers et al., 2013) is a well-established measure of posttraumatic stress symptoms defined by DSM-5 criteria (Blevins et al., 2015). The measure has shown to aid valid inferences regarding posttraumatic stress symptoms in clinical and undergraduate student samples (Weathers et al., 2013). This 20-item scale asks how "bothersome" symptoms had been over the last month (0 = not at all and 4 = extremely). Items include, "In the past month, how much have you been bothered by: repeated, disturbing, and unwanted memories of the stressful experience?" Internal consistency for the PCL-5 in this sample was excellent (a = .96).

Data analysis

A chi-square test assessed differences in participants' choice of article between trigger warning-labeled or unlabeled. Interpersonal violence (IPV) history was coded as a binary variable (i.e., endorsed or not) as follows: participants were coded as having an IPV history if they endorsed physical and/or sexual abuse at any time in their life. A 2[chi square] between subjects ANCOVA compared the reading comprehension scores between groups based on selected article (trigger warning vs. unlabeled) and IPV history (endorsed vs. not endorsed) using PCL-5 scores as a covariate. If the PCL-5 score proved nonsignificant as a covariate, then a planned 2[chi square] ANOVA would be conducted using all participants. Planned t-tests would analyze relationships found significant by the overall ANOVA.

Results

The chi-square analysis revealed no significant difference in the selection of trigger warning-labeled and unlabeled articles ($p = .415$). Those with and without a history of IPV did not differ on reading comprehension scores (with a history: $n = 86$, $M = 2.57$, $SE = .11$; without a history: $n = 122$, $M = 2.50$, $SE = .09$; $F(1,204) = 0.20$, $p = .656$). Reading comprehension scores also did not differ between article label selection (selected a trigger warning-labeled article: $n = 129$, $M = 2.52$, $SE = .09$; unlabeled: $n = 79$, $M = 2.55$, $SE = .11$; $F(1, 204) = 0.05$, $p = .821$).

The 2 (trigger warning-labeled selected vs. not) x 2 (IPV history endorsed vs. not) between subjects factorial ANCOVA revealed a significant trigger warning selection x IPV history interaction, $F(1, 163) = 8.72$, $p = .004$, partial =.051, observed 1--p = .84; no main effect of trigger warning label selection or IPV history ($p > .05$); and no significant covarying effect of PCL-5 scores ($p > .05$). As planned, a 2 (trigger warning-labeled selected vs. not) x 2 (IPV history endorsed vs. not) between subjects

factorial ANOVA was conducted and revealed a significant trigger warning selection x IPV history interaction, F(l, 204) = 7.71, p= .004, partial =.039, observed 1 -13 = .82, and no main effect of trigger warning label selection or IPV history (p > .05).

The planned follow-up t-tests indicated that those with IPV histories scored more poorly on the reading comprehension test (n = 58, M = 2.34, SD = LOO) than their peers without IPV histories who read the same trigger warning-labeled material (n = 71, M= 2.69, SD = 0.92; t(121) = -2.04,p = .044; 95% CI [-0.68, -0.01], Figure 2). However, those with IPV histories scored better on the reading comprehension test (n = 28, M = 2.77, SD = 0.96) than their peers without IPV histories who read the same unlabeled-labeled material (n = 51, M = 2.31, SD = 0.99; t(77) =2.05, p = .044; 95% CI [0.01, 0.93], Figure 2).

Discussion

This study investigated two previously untested concerns voiced in the literature regarding potential risks of trigger warning use: 1) that those using trigger warnings would avoid the task and 2) that performance would suffer if students engaged the task. It extended previous work with trauma-naive participants by studying student participants with self-reported trauma histories.

Results did not support the avoidance concern. In fact, students as a whole trended toward selecting the trigger warning-labeled articles, although the difference was not statistically significant. There was, however, support for the concern that trigger warning use might impair performance, and that risk of impairment would be greater when there is congruence between trauma histories of participants and the trigger warning content. In the present study, students who endorsed both an IPV history and read the trigger warning-labeled article showed the lowest reading test score, whereas those without this history who read the same trigger warning-labeled article showed the highest scores. While these results suggest that triggers warnings pose a risk for a nocebo-like effect (e.g., Enck, Benedetti, & Schedlowski, 2008) in select users, the process through which the performance impairment operated was not studied and remains unknown.

Limitations

FIGURE 1. Screenshot of the article selection page.

All articles are pulled from National Public Radio's website (cited in order of appearance: Plata, 2018; Logan, Lombardo, & Kamenetz, 2018; Goldman, 2018; Held, 2018). The two trigger warnings at the end of the title would switch onto different titles for different participants. The number of students who saw the trigger warnings on different articles did not differ significantly (number of students who saw trigger warnings on articles 1 and 2, n = 37; 1 and 3, n = 33; 1 and 4, n = 38; 2 and 3, n = 32; 2 and 4, n = 34; 3 and 4, n =34).

Although the difference in reading comprehension observed in this study reached statistical significance, it is reasonable to question its practical significance in the classroom. There was an eight-percentage point difference on a five-point quiz. However, this result still raises a warranted concern because the direction of the effect is opposite one would want if the trigger warning was intended as an academic accommodation.

Although the gender distribution of the participant sample (76.9% female) was consistent with previous studies and meta-analyses (86.3%) using participants who have experienced IPV (Weaver & Clum, 1995), it lacked the racial diversity that would improve generalizability of its results.

Conclusions

Trigger warnings have been proposed as an accommodation for students with posttraumatic vulnerabilities including those with PTSD. Students with PTSD are often eligible for academic

accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2002). Title 1 of this act states that colleges have an obligation to adjust aspects of student life to ensure equal access or to "even the playing field." Results of the present study support concerns voiced in the literature that trigger warnings may actually produce deleterious effects that bias the playing field against intended users. These results are consistent with other initial studies investigating the consequences of trigger warning use (Bellet et al., 2018) and support the recommendation for further empirical study before implementation of trigger warnings is considered. In the meantime, students with posttraumatic vulnerabilities concerned that classroom content may interfere with their academic performance or posttraumatic recovery may be best advised to seek psychological treatments with demonstrated efficacy for trauma- and stressor-related disorders. Further study to replicate results and, if replicated, investigate possible mechanisms is supported.

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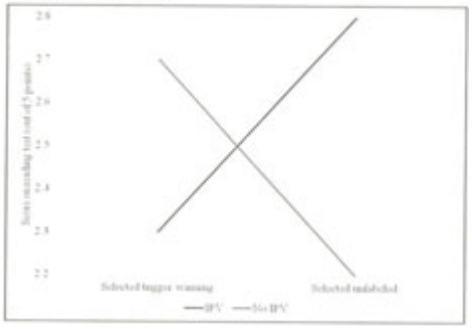
FIGURE 2. Reading comprehension scores by IPV and article selection groups. There was a significant interaction of IPV history and article label selection, but no main effect of IPV history or label selection.



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Supplementary Material 1

As follows is the article taken from National Public Radio with underlined portions that informed the reading comprehension test questions.

Students. Alumni Watch As Michigan State Tries To Restore Its Reputation

January 30, 20185:05 AM ET

Heard on Morning Edition

RICK PLUTA FROM Michigan Radio

The university grapples with the aftermath of the Larry Nassar sex abuse scandal that's left students, faculty, alumni and donors wondering what's next, and bracing for civil suits against the school.

DAVID GREENE, HOST:

All right, Michigan State University is only beginning the process now of recovering from a devastating scandal. This follows last week's sentencing of Larry Nassar, the former Michigan State and U.S. Gymnastics team doctor who sexually assaulted patients for decades. As we're about to hear from Michigan Public Radio's Rick Pluta, alumni, students and donors are watching to see how the school will work to restore its reputation.

RICK PLUTA, BYLINE: Many survivors of Larry Nassar's abuse don't just blame him. They also blame MSU officials for failing to act even after multiple complaints. The scandal forced MSU President Lou Anna Simon to step down last week, followed by athletic director Mark Mollis, and there could be more resignations coming. The school's board of trustees has also come under withering attack for actions that seemed to focus more on limiting the school's culpability than on supporting victims.

DIANNE BYRUM: My voice should've been louder much sooner.

PLUTA: That's MSU trustee Dianne Byrum, who says she's learned from this horrible experience.

BYRUM: The situation with Larry Nassar is reflective of the culture that needs to change on campus.

PLUTA: The Michigan Legislature is now looking into the rules for impeaching MSU board members, who are selected by voters in statewide elections. It's an environment that has a lot of MSU students and alums struggling to maintain their Spartan pride. Laura Klinger lives in Milwaukee but grew up in East Lansing in the shadow of Michigan State, graduating from there in

2012 with a degree in human biology. Klinger says she owns more than a dozen Spartan sweatshirts, hats and T-shirts.

LAURA KLINGER: It's just a big part of my identity.

PLUTA: Laura Klinger would travel back to MSU as often as possible to catch basketball and football games. But now Klinger, who works in sexual assault prevention on college campuses, says she's done with MSU sports, and her Spartan gear will sit in a drawer.

KLINGER: I'm really horrified with what my alma mater has been complicit in.

PLUTA: MSU faces multiple investigations by the state, the U.S. Department of Education and the NCAA. There will likely be hearings before the state Legislature and Congress. There are at least 140 civil lawsuits filed by victims. MSU hired a former federal prosecutor to conduct an internal review, but that was focused largely on protecting the school's legal position. The results of the review have never been made public. At 50,000 students. MSU is the largest public university in Michigan and the ninth largest in the country. Matt Friedman, who advises schools on crisis communications, says MSU needs to remember why it's there.

MATT FRIEDMAN: Students are the reason why the institution exists. The institution has a mission to educate the students who are paying to be there and expect to get a full education and also be safe at the same time.

PLUTA: Then there's the question of how Michigan State will compensate Nassar's victims. At Penn State, the cost of the Jerry Sandusky scandal could run to a quarter of a billion dollars. Michigan State estimates its legal settlements alone could top a billion dollars. Taxpayer money makes up 20 percent of MSU's budget. There is currently a bill before the Michigan Legislature that would ban the use of taxpayer funds to pay the settlements. Many, like Laura Klinger. are watching for evidence of profound change at the school.

KLINGER: I want to see everybody who was even remotely involved in this out.

PLUTA: But before that, MSU's reputation will take another hit this week as Larry Nassar faces another group of victims in a final round of sentencing hearings. For NPR News. I'm Rick Pluta in Lansing.

(SOUNDBITE OF BAULTA'S "DO WE LIVE TODAY?")

MADELINE BRUCE

Saint Lotas University

DAWN ROBERTS

Bradley University

Table 1. Comprehension Test Question Results (N = 208)

Question	Answers
1. Who stepped down from their positions at MSU?	*A. The president followed by the athletic director.
	B. The athletic director followed by the president.
	C. The president followed by the Dean of Osteopathic Medicine.
	D. The Dean of Osteopathic Medicine followed by the president.
2. The school is facing investigations by what bodies?	*A. The State of Michigan.
	B. The Federal Office of Civil Rights.
	*C. The US Department of Education.

	*D. The NCAA.		
	E. The East Lansing Police Department.		
	*A. Everyone involved needs to leave.		
3. Klinger said of her alma mater:	B. She won't donate to the school anymore.		
	C. She got rid of her Spartan gear.		
Question		n selected	% selected
1. Who stepped down from their positions at MSU?		118	56.7%
		7-1	35.6%
		5	2.4%
		11	5.3%
2. The school is facing investigations by what bodies?		110	52.9%
		44	21.2%
		89	42.8%
		123	59.1%
		33	15.9%
		128	61.5%
3. Klinger said of her alma mater:		26	12.5%
		54	25.5%

Note. Questions 1 and 3 are worth 1 point. Question 2 has 3 possible correct answers, each worth 1 point.
All participants read the same article and completed the same comprehension test. Score range: 1-5.
(*) correct answers.

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)
Barker, David B.Bruce, Madeline, and Dawn Roberts. "TRIGGER WARNINGS FOR ABUSE IMPACT READING COMPREHENSION IN STUDENTS WITH HISTORIES OF ABUSE." *College Student Journal*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2020, p. 157+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A634682856/AONE?u=flinders&sid=AONE&xid=9482a17c. Accessed 7 Jan. 2021.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A634682856