The Woman in Black: A Defense of Trigger Warnings in Creating Inclusive Academic Spaces for Trauma-Affected Students through a Feminist Disability Studies Pedagogy

Laura Jane Bower

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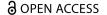
Laura Jane Bower ●iD

Department of Sociology, Durham University, Durham, UK

ABSTRACT

Trigger warnings have been at the heart of a heated debate within academic circles since they burst into higher education in 2013. Using an intersectional feminist disability studies pedagogy, this article traces the ableist assumptions underscoring anti-trigger warning concerns around avoidance, coddling of students, and "overcoming" impairment language. It also examines the misconstructions in anti-trigger warning arguments centered on academic freedom, and agency, mapping out ambiguous trigger warning definitions. I argue that trigger warnings are vital accommodations necessary for creating inclusive academic spaces for trauma-affected students and students with disabilities to prepare themselves to engage with distressing materials. Academics must heed caution in distinguishing between discomfort and emotional harm to avoid devaluing the lived experiences of trauma-affected students.

Introduction

Medina (2014) blatantly mocked a student from Rutgers University who requested the inclusion of a trigger warning for The Great Gatsby and Mrs. Dalloway. Lukianoff (2016, p. 65) jumped upon this example, describing students as taking "advantage of a psychological term developed to help those traumatized in the ghastly trenches of the First World War to justify being protected from The Great Gatsby;" completely dismissing the notion that any student with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) could be triggered by the content of the books. Despite Fitzgerald's novel containing depictions of intimate partner violence (Dilevko, 2015), and Woolf's featuring suicidal thoughts and the experiences of war veterans, topics that could be triggering for students with histories of trauma (Campbell & Manning, 2018). These particular comments truly struck a chord with me as a feminist researcher and former criminology student with a formal diagnosis of Complex PTSD, who found it extremely

distressing to study The Woman in Black by Susan Hill; a book that served as a very unexpected but horrific trigger for my past experiences of childhood trauma.

The example is hardly in isolation. 2013 was even hailed as the "year of the trigger warning" (Carter, 2019), catalyzing a moral panic through academic circles. Since trigger warnings have entered the higher education landscape, they have been at the center of an incredibly heated debate (Dalton, 2020). In perhaps the most staunch instance, Lukianoff (2016, p. 1) described trigger warnings as the "gun to the head of academia." But what are trigger warnings and what do they entail? Although there is somewhat of a murky consensus, which shall be explored further later on, trigger warnings are essentially alerts, used to flag to viewers that upcoming content could present a reminder of previous trauma (Boysen, 2017; Bruce et al., 2021). Specifically in academia, trigger warnings alert students, especially trauma-affected students and students with mental health conditions, about course material that could be distressing (Kimble et al. 2021).

I shall first briefly trace the origins of the term "trigger warning." Using an intersectional, feminist disability studies pedagogy, I shall re-examine some of the key debates surrounding the usage of trigger warnings within higher education contexts, repositioning these with a specific focus on students with lived experiences of trauma and disabilities. Finally, I shall situate anti-trigger warning debates within constructs of oppression, stressing how the neo-liberalist assumptions surrounding healing are fundamentally ableist and inherently flawed. This will be considered amidst a backdrop of intersecting forces of oppression that prevent students with experience of trauma from fully engaging within the classroom.

Tracing origins

Pinpointing exactly what a trigger warning is

First used in feminist blogs and online discussion forums (Campbell & Manning, 2018), trigger warnings have spurred a controversial debate within higher education (Jones et al., 2020). The most glaring issue within the trigger warning debate is the substantial variation in definitions and ambiguous etymology (Lockhart, 2016), resulting in arguments often not beginning with the same starting points (Boysen & Prieto, 2018). The term is used more generally in academia to give warnings to students regarding anything they may encounter within their academic courses or the university environment that could cause them discomfort (Vatz, 2016). Trigger warnings can be given in multiple formats, with the majority of teachers who provide them choosing to use more than just one method (Boysen et al., 2016). Although trigger warnings are usually thought of as verbal warnings given in advance of a lecture or a written note on reading material (Beverly et al., 2018), they can also include syllabus warnings, verbal warnings throughout the semester, in assignment instructions, and warnings on course management software (Boysen et al., 2016).

In alignment with feminist disabilities studies pedagogy, trigger warnings should be defined as flags given to students in advance of their encountering of material that could be potentially distressing, particularly for students with lived experiences of trauma or disabilities. "Flags" is chosen here rather than alerts or warnings as it is

the most empowering language possible; it does not blanketly assume trauma-affected students will be triggered by distressing content, rather it is a tool students use for their self-management. Further, the temporal aspect, of in advance, stresses the need for students to have time to actively choose to engage with content, rather than it being sprung upon them.

Triggers and "being triggered"

An important question to unpack is what do we actually mean when we conceptualize "triggers?" Unsurprisingly, the answer to this question is not simple (Dalton, 2020). Our understanding of triggers within higher education is perhaps best understood as being positioned on a continuum, with differing levels of resemblance to clinical and psychotherapeutic definitions. The closest understandings to clinical conceptualizations of triggers, position them as experiences that ignite or catalyze symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder or similar anxiety disorders associated with trauma, such as experiences of panic attacks, dissociation, and flashbacks (for example, Campbell & Manning, 2018; Lockhart, 2016). Here, triggers are essential things that could make an individual with a history of trauma relieve an aspect of a traumatizing experience, such as helicopters triggering a war veteran (Snyder, 2014), or discussions of weight triggering someone with a history of disordered eating. Thus, trigger warnings, under this usage are designed to alert people with PTSD that they may view content that could potentially trigger their traumatic experience (Campbell & Manning, 2018), in a manner akin to warning an epileptic that content contains the use of flashing lights.

At the other end of the continuum, we see a move away from clinical understandings, to an articulation that students without PTSD may still find content that causes discomfort, anxiety, or even offense to potentially be triggering to them (Rae, 2016). It is generally assumed here that whilst students may be less severely impacted by content as students with clinical diagnoses of PTSD, they could still be emotionally affected. A topic can be viewed as triggering as it may contain a negative subject matter and could cause distress to viewers by reminding them of past traumatic experiences (Vingiano, 2014). Yet often understandings take a rather simplistic, surface-level view of triggers and how PTSD affects people through only being able to comprehend directly linked material (Dalton, 2020). Surface-level approaches tend to only understand that a victim-survivor of sexual violence could be triggered by watching a film depicting a rape scene, as Lukianoff (2016) acknowledged. However, diving a little deeper, a host of psychological literature has established that triggers are often very specific to an individual and can be extremely unpredictable to outsiders, sometimes unrelated to the original traumatic event (such as Richter-Levin & Sandi, 2021; Bellet et al., 2020). For example, Raine (2002) described how one victim-survivor of rape was triggered by seeing a fish being killed in a market, and another whilst delivering her child in hospital. Thus, to an outsider, triggers can appear entirely unrelated (Snyder, 2009). Academics and educators must take note of this when considering what could be triggering for students, which has presented a challenge as anticipating topics constructed as potentially triggering has become increasingly tricky (Vatz, 2016).

"Triggers" themselves elicit powerful emotional responses or undesirable recollections of past traumatic incidents (Kimble et al., 2021). However, emotions themselves tend not to be triggered by external events, such as watching a depiction of violence; but by a person's thoughts and emotions surrounding those events (Beck, 2002). For example, a person with lived experience of trauma may be triggered by anticipation of danger, catalyzed by memories of previous threatening experiences (Saketopoulou, 2014). Triggers are not just immediate reactions, but affective experiences for people with lived experiences of trauma, and this misconstruction creates one of the gaping holes in trigger warning rhetoric and literature. Studies into the impact of trigger warnings typically test the effects trigger warnings have on participants' anxiety before encountering short-term, potentially triggering stimuli, neglecting the potential long-term effects that viewing triggering material can have on people with disabilities and lived experiences of trauma (Jones et al. 2020). Shaw-Thornburg (2014) described, in considerable detail, their feelings when having to read a book as part of a university course, which had considerable effects on their daily life, such as their non-existent appetite and inability to clean themselves for several weeks afterward; a kind of affective experience not explored in trigger warning research. As students with lived experience of trauma, particularly those studying criminology where they are likely encountering distressing material throughout their course, the temporal aspect of exposure and longer-lasting effects come into play. Thus, triggers should not simply be constructed as momentary experiences with fleeting emotions, but affective experiences that could linger or reoccur for trauma-affected students for days, or even weeks afterward.

Locating myself theoretically

As touched upon previously, I am a former student with a longstanding history of trauma, having been formally diagnosed with Complex PTSD before university. Therefore, I also fit the description of a former disabled student. I recognize that these past experiences likely, if not almost certainly, affect my understanding and theorizations of trauma as a feminist criminologist who now teaches undergraduates.

Feminist disability studies pedagogy ("FDSP") was first coined as a distinct tool by Kristina Knoll, to encourage academics to take privilege and oppression seriously when creating enabling pedagogies (Jarman & Thompson-Ebanks, 2020). Although Knoll did value underlying universal design principles, she heeded caution in teachers using approaches that attempted to universalize ideas of disability, as educators have an inability to create a "one size fits all approach" for disabled students (Knoll, 2008). Rather, "the concept of universal design must always be tempered by a commitment to recognize and address unforeseen barriers and needs of individual students (Knoll, 2009, p. 127). Knoll (2009) proposed FDSP as an approach to question access for students with disabilities to the classroom, stressing that accessibility should not be considered solely through inclusion, as contemporaries had done, but through the scope of understanding intersecting systems of power and oppression. FDSP essentially translates the theoretical understandings of feminist disability studies

into practice, where the classroom becomes "a site where theory meets practice" (Carter, 2019, p. 2).

It would be extremely simplistic to assume that critical feminist disability studies are simply scholarship exploring women with disabilities, rather it "reimagines disability" (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p. 1557). In particular, it is also concerned with social, political, and material intersections, examining the implications of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality amidst the intersectional praxis of disability (Jarman & Thompson-Ebanks, 2020). After all, "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (Lorde, 1984, p. 138). FDSP builds upon feminist disability studies, stressing the importance of creating inclusive, accessible learning environments, as well as encouraging educators to view disabled students as complete persons (Carter, 2019).

Of course, it must be acknowledged that trauma-affected students and students with disabilities are two distinctive categories, even if they do have some considerable overlap, as not all those who experience trauma develop PTSD or other trauma-related conditions (Creamer et al., 2001). However, as trigger warnings in university circles are primarily designed and used with the intention of making reasonable adjustments or accommodations for disability (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018), it is appropriate to apply an FDSP framework to them. Moreover, as Garland-Thomson (2005) stressed in particular, solely focusing on the experiences of disabled people through the lens of disability is overly simplistic as it ignores intersecting margins of privilege and oppression; grounding debates in FDSP allows for much deeper exploration, beyond disability-orientated debates solely centered upon inclusion.

Dismantling the main arguments against trigger warnings

Academic freedom and avoidance

Concerns center around fears that trigger warning policy, particularly blanket, universal mandatory trigger warnings will greatly restrict teachers' freedom in addressing difficult topics and selecting reading material (Kritikos, 2016; Stone, 2016). These arguments often drift into fears that students will fall foul to missed learning opportunities if a trigger warning is issued, as they may deliberately avoid distressing content (Jones, 2017). Within this space, trigger warnings are viewed as provoking anxiety within students that the learning environment they have been warned against may be unpleasant (McNally, 2014). Hume (2015) believes that trigger warnings have created a climate within academia where educators feel scared of being perceived as causing deliberate harm to others through offending them, with forced trigger warning policies being positioned as a stepping-stone to the censoring of any speech and topics that could be considered offensive (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Trigger warnings here are positioned as "a genuinely slippery slope" where free speech and intellectual freedom are undermined and encroached upon by the use of trigger warnings (Lukianoff, 2016, p. 59). Of course, these arguments are somewhat hypothetical, as there is a lack of substantial evidence to suggest widespread institutions imposing mandatory trigger warning policies (Cares et al. 2022).

Students wishing for trigger warnings are not calling for the removal of content, quite the opposite actually, they are seeking accommodations to allow themselves to engage with it. As Stringer (2016, p. 64) maintained "students who call upon the lecturer to use trigger warnings tend to also be the students who most ardently want the lecturer to teach on that topic that might be triggering to them." Students asking for trigger warnings are signaling to educators the accommodations they need to participate in their education (Byron, 2017). In certain disciplines or theoretical genres, distressing content is posited as completely unavoidable; where trigger warnings could, in theory, be applied to an entire subject matter (Cares et al., 2022; Vatz, 2016). Although arguably the most fitting of these subjects is criminology, a body of literature has still noted their usage guided by individual topic areas (for example, Cares et al., 2021). Moreover, typically trigger warnings are used to flag especially distressing content within sub-sections of modules or sub-courses, such as rape law in criminal law (Dalton, 2020). Similarly, Boysen et al. (2016) found that although the majority of educators of abnormal psychology did not routinely use trigger warnings, nearly half of instructors offered trigger warnings when covering content related to suicide. So these "inherent trigger warnings" in certain disciplines are somewhat called into question, particularly when considering the levels of distressing material.

Avoiding equating discomfort with trauma

Discomfort is the antithesis of comfort, a feeling of not fitting in with one's environment (Boysen, 2017). Yet there is a distinctive difference between feelings of discomfort and experiencing trauma; this is often neglected or dismissed within the trigger warning debate (Rae, 2016). The major danger of equating discomfort with trauma is that it seriously minimizes the impact trauma can have on students. Rae (2016, p. 95) postulates that discomfort is a passing feeling that does not serve as a barrier to learning, even if it is not a comfortable feeling to experience, whereas trauma renders learning "virtually impossible," by completely derailing students' focus. Memories of traumatic events "overwhelm the brain's capacity to process information" (Solomon & Heide, 2005, p. 54). We must be really careful here not to make blanket assumptions surrounding disorientation. From a critical disabilities studies (CDS) viewpoint, we can examine widespread cultural presumptions that disabilities disorientate individuals (Parrey, 2020); with disorientation referring to experiences that "make it hard to go on" in terms of confusion surrounding what is a good action, not knowing how to achieve an action or whether it is possible (Harbin, 2016, p. 17). Mitchell and Snyder observed that "nearly every culture views disability as a problem in need of a solution" and due to their "deficit" in body-mind, disabled people become viewed as objects of disorientation (2000, p. 1). It of course must be acknowledged that that not all students with experiences of trauma automatically have a traumatic response when viewing distressing content, they may very well simply experience discomfort (Lukianoff, 2016).

Yet a clear distinction has to be made between discomfort, discomfort caused by taking offense, and trauma responses. They are not the same to experience, both in terms of the temporal aspect and affectiveness. This blanket equation extremely devalues the lived experience of trauma-affected students. As Thorpe (2016, p. 85)

noted "taking offense is not the same as a panic attack or relieving trauma;" they are distinctive reactions both physiologically and psychologically, particularly due to reoccurrence. Trauma is often postulated as occurring beyond the specific traumatic event, but in actuality, the recurrent experiences after the incident are a particular differentiator between experiences of discomfort, even to extreme levels, and experiences of trauma (Carter, 2019).

Developments of the threat to an academic freedom-censorship debate take this one stage further and situate trigger warnings amidst discourses of avoidance. It begins with a contentious assumption that trigger warnings can harm people with lived experiences of trauma (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; McNally, 2016), by reinforcing to students their inability to cope independently with distressing material by signaling their need for protection (McNally, 2014). By their very definition, trigger warnings perpetuate the idea that students must be explicitly alerted of upsetting content, positioning students as unable to anticipate their traumatic responses, suggesting that they have inadequate coping skills, and are vulnerable to harm (Stallman et al., 2017). Trigger warnings can thus almost create a self-fulfilling prophecy for trauma-affected students, making them more likely to respond negatively (Engelhard et al., 2009). For example, Bellet et al. (2020) found that trigger warnings actually sabotaged participants' feelings surrounding their resilience and that trigger warnings centralized trauma in participants' identities.

Rather, trigger warnings could have the opposite of their intended effect; trigger warnings can increase participants self-reported anxiety surrounding distressing material in a manner that is statistically significant, although small (Bellet et al., 2018, 2020; Sanson et al., 2019), including with individuals with PTSD (Jones et al. 2020). Often studies cite evidence of trigger warnings exacerbating anxiety levels to indicate their ineffectiveness; although this an important point to consider, whether trigger warnings actually work, the debate certainly does not stop here. Studies, like the ones cited above, have still left many unanswered questions concerning the lasting effect triggering material can have on trauma-affected students (Kimble et al., 2021), through testing only a small range of negative physiological outcomes and short-term adverse effects. Rather than considering longer-term impacts and cumulative effects students may encounter, such as an entire violence and abuse module. Moreover, these studies typically select graphic material that is more evocative than the material used in academic classrooms (Kimble et al., 2021). So whilst evidence cannot simply be dismissed, it is not as cut and dry as is suggested by anti-trigger warning arguments.

Avoidance culture

Trigger warning critics consider that there is an emergence of "avoidance culture" within academia (Nolan & Roberts, 2021), where students can treat them as a means of removing themselves from learning environments they may find uncomfortable or distance themselves from content they disagree with. Through avoidance rhetoric, a student being flagged potentially distressing content may feel anxious about engaging with said material in a learning environment, subsequently, they may skip class or not review the required reading material (Laguardia et al., 2017). Yet in stark contrast, studies have found that individuals rarely avoided material due to trigger warnings

(Kimble, 2019). Alternatively, trigger warnings had trivial (Sanson et al. 2019) or marginal (Gainsburg & Earl, 2018) impacts on avoidance, including no differences in people with trauma triggers or PTSD (Kimble et al., 2021).

It would be extremely dismissive to only consider avoidance as a negative consequence of trigger warnings. Rather, albeit paradoxically, avoidance is both a benefit but also a potential harm of trigger warning usage (Bridgland & Takarangi, 2022). Avoidance should also be situated within the therapeutic discourse, as it is a commonly known symptom of PTSD but is also a widely mentioned symptom within other mental health disorders (Krypotos et al., 2015). It is extremely tricky terrain to navigate. Some research indicates that avoidance can aid the recovery of people with lived experiences of trauma and can have short-term effects on reducing anxiety (Hofmann & Hay, 2018). However, there is general agreeance that long-term avoidance for trauma survivors is harmful (Jones et al., 2020).

Agency

The focus of anti-trigger warning advocates when considering avoidance is often misdirected on what may be lost to the student or what is detracted from their educational journey, rather than focusing on the *inclusion* of students with lived experiences of trauma. Disability scholars, such as Titchkosky (2011), particularly stress critical engagement with "access" within university spaces, to further promote our understanding of how the processes and structures of disability can shape disabled students' experiences. As universities are educational systems structured around the categorization of learning differences, they can be a space that perpetuates ableist norms that must be challenged by instructors (Collins, 2013).

Price (2011) famously noted that expectations at the cornerstone of academia are designed to in the worst cases exclude, or at best, create obstacles for these students, with "mental disabilities" serving as an umbrella term for students with a diagnosis relating to cognitive processes. These conditions are all interlinked by their irreconcilability with academic ideals of order, rationality, and intellectuality, particularly the ordered mind. Thus, the "academic discourse operates not just to omit, but to abhor mental disability—to reject it, to stifle and expel it" (Price, 2011, p. 8). For instance, seminars require a certain mental sharpness in spontaneous oral exchanges that students experiencing brain fog from PTSD may be further marginalized by (Jarman and Thompson-Ebanks, 2020). This is also particularly pertinent given that these academic norms were historically defined originally by bodies marked by able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006), whiteness, and heteronormativity (Stanley et al., 2013), showcasing how disabled students are systematically structurally excluded (Snyder & Mitchell, 2001), particularly those who find themselves subjected to other forms of exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Given that exclusion and subjectification to forms of discrimination, such as racism, homophobia, and misogyny can actually produce and reproduce trauma for marginalized students, making it increasingly important to have an attentiveness to historical, cultural, ethnic, and gendered systems of oppression in the classroom. As McAdoo et al. (2023) noted, talking specifically of race in trauma-informed care in universities, identities, and additional stressors matter in understanding the unique experiences of marginalized students.

Stringer (2016, p. 63) dismissed concerns about students avoiding work, stressing instead that trigger warnings should not be considered from the focus of "removing words, ideas and subjects from the syllabus; instead, they are about adding a system of warnings or forecasts about upcoming content." Trigger warnings promote inclusion within the classroom and are simply accommodations for students with lived experiences of trauma (Carter, 2019; Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018). Especially as there is a legal precedent for accommodations to be made for disabled students within the classroom that has already been set (Lockhart, 2016). They also promote inclusion for trauma-affected students without the protection or accommodations granted specifically and legally with a formal medical diagnosis (Kafer, 2016), particularly as socio-political inequalities such as ethnicity and class can also create additional barriers to accessing healthcare (Carter, 2019), further stressing the importance of accommodations for students beyond those with formal disability diagnoses.

One of the most resounding arguments for the usage of trigger warnings is that their deployment allows students to emotionally and physically prepare themselves for encountering potentially triggering or distressing content (Kyrölä, 2019; Cares et al., 2019; Beverly et al., 2018). These arguments stress a detraction from avoidance, but rather the reconceptualization of viewing trigger warnings as a tool to encourage and aid students in encountering traumatic stimuli (Lockhart, 2016). Trigger warnings allow educators to honor students' agency, enabling them to prepare themselves for attending class or reading preparatory material, and managing their reactions (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018). They are tools that are not particularly time-consuming for teachers, but effective in alerting students (Manne, 2015), and offering an "opt-in system," giving agency to students with lived experience of trauma (Carter, 2019), particularly given that educators expect students to come prepared to class through setting preparatory material. Through forewarning students, educators allow students to enact these defensive tactics to prepare themselves to cope with distressing content; such as selecting a seat in a classroom where they can easily leave the room if necessary, engaging with material in a setting most comfortable or safe for them, or even proactively scheduling therapeutic support to coincide with engaging with the material (Kimble et al., 2021).

Thus, through this lens of trigger warnings, educators are better able to show care for trauma-affected students by making accommodations for them. Trigger warnings are therefore congruent with Dolmage and Hobgood's orientation of care when developing pedagogical approaches to disability; where "to care through is not to contain, define or discipline disability but to provide a space for what disability is, more so, might become" (2015, p. 565). Given students with PTSD and other trauma-related conditions have often been marginalized in debates surrounding avoidance, pedagogies of care allow instructors to make classrooms and educational arenas more habitable (Jarman & Thompson-Ebanks, 2020). We certainly cannot ignore that trigger warnings can have small impacts on evoking anxiety in students, nor can we completely dismiss trigger warnings as having no effects on avoidance. However, trigger warnings permit students with lived experience of trauma agency to engage, avoid, or distance themselves from distressing content, particularly disabled students. In fact, refusing to give trigger warnings, could be conceptualized as denying access to students with lived experiences of trauma and disabilities, as denial runs contrary to disability studies' informed approaches promoting inclusion.

Infantilizing students

Alongside concerns of censoring that have been previously outlined, trigger warnings were also positioned as infantilizing students (Calderon & Wakefield, 2014). Instructors also raised concerns about the usage of trigger warnings as "coddling students" by not exposing them to any material that could cause discomfort, despite this being one of the very purposes of higher education (Dilevko, 2015). Vatz (2016, p. 53) described that "the university should be a place in which students generally confront uncomfortable ideas" and the coddling of students was completely "antithetical and destructive" to this. Similarly, Lukianoff (2016, p. 60) notes that "discomfort is a necessary part of a real, adult-level education." Amidst infantilization and coddling rhetoric, students are often branded as hypersensitive due to their inability to engage with distressing content. Vatz (2016, pp. 54–55) quite dismissively questioned the notion that students were psychologically suffering, rather the push for trigger warnings was coming from "progressive professoriate" who were "intent on protecting hypersensitive students." Here again, we see a very clear blurring between discomfort and emotional harm. Carter (2019, p. 1) concurred that a trigger is "not the same as being challenged outside of one's comfort zone, being reminded of a bad feeling, or having to sit with disturbing truths." Whilst a person could experience offense due to previous traumatic experiences, they are two distinct concepts that explain different levels of emotional responses and should not be conflated.

Trigger warnings are viewed as less appropriate in university spaces, than in therapeutic environments as the university is akin to the "real world" (Drum, 2014), where trigger warnings are viewed as a type of "weepy rhetoric" by critics. Yet, a byproduct of Drum"s argument is the idea that public spaces, such as universities, are not accommodative of students with experiences of trauma. They are grounded in foundations that are contrary to disability studies informed approaches, where inclusion is situated within arenas of place, where disability is considered a pathology (Valle & Connor, 2019). Arguments constructing students as "hyper-sensitive" severely minimize the seriousness of trauma, and the experiences of trauma-affected students (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018). Stringer (2016, p. 64) described this as "trivializing" the concerns of trauma-affected students, which is hardly conducive to an inclusive learning environment. Halberstam (2017, p. 537) was particularly condemnatory of support for trigger warnings, as a consequence of their usage was a widespread construction of viewing students as "unstable and damaged and could at any moment collapse into crisis." Here, Halberstam is making a similar argument proposed by Haidt and Lukianoff (2018). Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) noted that trigger warnings create a culture of victimhood, where students are constructed as hypersensitive and unable to cope with the demands of higher education, a place where encountering distressing material is both necessary and critical to a meaningful learning experience. Ableism is at the heart of these constructions of trauma-affected students. Rae (2016, p. 96) noted claims students are "too sensitive rests on ableist assumptions that effectively deny the existence of mental illness and dictate what (re)defines 'real pain.'" Grouping all students collectively as "hypersensitive" is extremely exclusionary of students with experiences of trauma and students with disabilities, as their lived experiences and emotional needs are completely devalued.

Oppression, privilege, and reasonable accommodations

Opposers of trigger warnings from the justification of overcoming trauma set an extremely dangerous precedent for trauma-affected students, particularly students with disabilities. Beliefs start with a misdirected assumption that people can develop resilience from experiencing, dealing with, and navigating distress, by learning coping mechanisms and strategies they can carry forward (Eley & Stallman, 2014). The defense of anti-trigger warning arguments within the dimension of resilience usually centers around the notion that life outside of university space does not come with a content warning. As Kritikos (2016, p. 15) stressed "life can be unpredictable and upsetting. Bad things can happen. Life has no trigger warning." Yet in actuality, we exist in a "rich and established culture of warning" (Dalton, 2020, p. 91). Warning labels and content advisories are now common occurrences in films and television shows (Campbell & Manning, 2018). People can also give an informal "heads up" about material that might upset others, in a manner with a similar rationale to trigger warnings but what we might also view as basic common courtesy. For example, Lockhart (2016) described how a colleague warned her of Javert's suicide before they went to see Les Misérables, knowing her friend had recently similarly taken their own life a few weeks prior. The underlying principles of trigger warnings are hardly new.

Along this vein of thought, the ability to cope with challenging circumstances is constructed as beneficial to students (Heath et al., 2017). Borrowing tenets of thinking from the psychological exposure therapies used in patients with PTSD and other trauma-related disorders (Lockhart, 2016), this is a dangerous mentality with a clear slippery slope. Exposure therapy is controversial in its own right and even setting this aside, treatments delivered in a controlled, clinical setting are not directly comparable to classroom environments by any means. After all, "a classroom is not a therapist's office" (Lockhart, 2016, p. 65), nor can educators force students to enter one. Postulating the idea that students with lived experience of trauma can "overcome" their trauma, let alone suggesting that they should, through exposure to distressing material, is making inherently ableist assumptions as it marks disabled bodies as inferior and minimizes the impact of trauma (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018). It also fails to understand the complexities of students' lived experiences with PTSD and other trauma-related conditions (Rae, 2016). Of course, it must be acknowledged that there is some clear value in encouraging students to move out of their comfort zones (Dalton, 2020; Kyrölä, 2019), particularly when we start pinning down examples of material that can truly engage students with real-world discussions of violence, gender, sexuality and racial inequalities. Goldberg (2016) noted that often examples from art, literature, television, and film within classroom settings enrich learning with their educational value often coming from their ability to evoke emotional reactions. Carter (2019, p. 6) describes this effect as "pedagogically productive discomfort."

However, these debates again descend down the slippery-slope track of censorship, viewing trigger warnings as almost a "get out of jail" card, where students have a free pass to avoid encountering unfavorable material. Yet, as anti-warning arguments even tend to agree, if we accept it is advantageous to equip students with the tools to navigate distressing topics (Byron, 2017; Stallman & Wilson, 2017), as well as it being beneficial to student learning for higher education to support students with their mental

health (Stallman, 2010), then surely trigger warnings offer students the solution to do so? If we flip back to the idea that trigger warnings prepare students with lived experiences of trauma to encounter distressing stimuli and material, then trigger warnings can only be viewed as necessary accommodations for students with disabilities.

In addition, anti-trigger warning ideas grounded in assumptions surrounding resilience, also reinforce oppressive forces within higher education. It is particularly evocative of neo-liberalist theorizations of trauma where both mental illness and trauma are framed as barriers students must overcome (Byron, 2017). Linton (1998) articulated how using language that centered around ideas that people with disabilities need to "overcome" their impairment, suggests that disabled people somehow need to negate their disability to achieve success in a particular setting. A neo-liberalist framework of bounding trauma with personal responsibility reinforces inadequacy and is extremely misguided. It forces responsibility on disabled individuals to seek accommodation and overcome obstacles themselves, positioning them as the sole person responsible for their success rather than designating institutions to provide equal access (Knoll, 2009). Notably, overcoming rhetoric reinforces the othering of students with lived experience of trauma and disabilities, as well as leaning into socially constructed viewpoints where ability is tied directly to those with physical, and social privileges (Knoll, 2009).

Occupying the position that people with impairments can overcome their disability, creates a dangerous trap that reinforces the superiority of able-bodiedness, in terms of both minds and physical bodies (Clare, 1999). Trauma survivors are forced to engage in a linear journey within the popular discourse to transform from a devalued "victim" mentality associated with helplessness, into a resilient, coping survivor (Boyle & Clay-Warner, 2018). Creating a simplified binary (Convery, 2006), where only one response to a traumatic experience has cultural value (Dunn, 2005); victim-survivors get caught in the "victim-survivor paradox" (Thompson, 2000). Where to occupy a survivor mentality, victimhood, and traits associated with victim identity become stigmatized (Leisenring, 2006). This is most vivid in expectations within anti-trigger warning arguments around discussions of victimhood culture (Friedersdorf, 2015), yet through their intention of devaluing victimhood, educators reinforce oppressive forces victim-survivors are subjected to.

Typically, alongside this, no regard is given to the myriad of historical, socio-political forces that intersect with lived experience of trauma, such as ethnic dimensions (Boyle & Rogers, 2020), or disability (Larson, 2018). In the case of those with disabilities, there is a climate of "compulsory survivorship" (Larson, 2018). Critically, those with lived experiences of trauma who are unable to live up to culturally constructed images of survivorhood are branded as both deviant and even mentally defective, until they conform (Dunn, 2005). This has migrated into the classroom with criticisms of trigger warnings using overcoming language. As Price (2011, p. 33) described there is a "popular conception that unsound minds have no place in the classroom…where "crazy" students are quickly referred out of the classroom to the school counseling center." Students who fail to measure up to neo-liberal paragons of private trauma and being fully-fledged survivors, fall short (Byron, 2017). Here, opposition to trigger warnings reinforces individualist models of disability, where trauma-affected students are told to seek help from healthcare settings, shifting responsibility away from higher

education (Carter, 2019; Kafer, 2016). In tandem, it also must be acknowledged that all people without experiences of trauma have a privilege as a result (Rae, 2016). Carter (2019, p. 1) noted that after all "there is no choice; our experiences of trauma shape how we move through the world." Carter here was specifically talking about teachers, but this line of thinking can be applied to students. In this vein, trigger warnings are necessary accommodations for students who do not have the luxury of navigating without trauma, it is an everyday occurrence for them.

Final thoughts

The trigger warning debate is murky terrain for educators to navigate, particularly with substantial variations in definitions and ambiguous etymology (Lockhart, 2016). However, academics and educators must be extremely mindful of the distinction between discomfort and emotional harm. Failure to do so greatly devalues the experiences of trauma-affected students and students with disabilities. Triggers should be viewed on a continuum, with different levels of resemblance to clinical and psychotherapeutic definitions, allowing educators to more fully understand how, for students with complex trauma, triggers are affective experiences. It of course must be acknowledged that trigger warnings are both paradoxically a benefit but also a potential harm, in terms of avoidance (Bridgland & Takarangi, 2022). Avoidance has often been mischaracterized within anti-trigger warnings movements, where students are portrayed as treating trigger warnings as a sort of "get out of jail" free pass to avoid engaging with the content they disagree with or find upsetting, missing out on important learning experiences. Whilst there is a clear lack of consensus on whether trigger warnings can accelerate or decrease the anxiety of trauma-affected students, in terms of inclusion, the benefits cannot be understated. Within these censorship and academic freedom debates, the focus on avoidance is often misdirected. Instead of concentrating on what may be lost to trauma-affected students, the inclusion of students with disabilities and lived experiences of trauma should be paramount.

Trigger warnings, by their design, do not restrict teachers from using distressing materials, rather trigger warnings alert students that content might be potentially traumatic (Lockhart, 2016; Rae, 2016). Trigger warning usage allows students to physically and emotionally prepare themselves for encountering potentially triggering or distressing content (Kyrölä, 2019), enabling them to participate in class and manage their reactions (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018). Whilst some trigger warnings do allow for students to avoid engaging with material, not attending class, or stepping out of the room, which could potentially allow for misuse, a concern that must be acknowledged. However, students must be afforded some degree of agency in terms of their own education. Given that students are expected to come prepared to class, trigger warnings grant agency to students with lived experiences of trauma, allowing them to "opt in" (Carter, 2019). If anything, trigger warnings are the exact opposite of a threat to academic freedom, they provide accommodations for all students to fully immerse themselves in the learning environment.

Academics also need to heed extreme caution in allowing ableist assumptions to seep into anti-trigger warning debates. Conceptualizations of trigger warnings as "coddling" students and constructing all students as hyper-sensitive, even if not

directed specifically at trauma-affected students, fail to acknowledge that trauma-affected students experience real emotional pain and have genuine vulnerabilities (Byron, 2017; Carter, 2019; Rae, 2016), devaluing their lived experience. Moreover, overcoming language rooted in the idea that trauma-affected students should rise above the obstacle their traumatic experiences present is inherently ableist rhetoric. It completely fails to comprehend the lived experiences of students living with PTSD and other trauma-related conditions (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018).

Takeaway

Whilst there is some merit in students being asked to step out of their comfort zones (Dalton, 2020; Kyrölä, 2019), as distressing material can be rather powerful in engaging students in real-world discussions, creating "pedagogically productive discomfort" (Carter, 2019, p. 6). However, neo-liberalist frameworks that bind trauma with personal responsibility reinforce the inadequacy of students with disabilities. Overcoming rhetoric crosses the line into tying the ability to perform in a higher education setting, directly to people with physical and social privileges (Knoll, 2009). Students existing with lived experiences of trauma are denied privilege by virtue of their past trauma experiences. Unfortunately, they do not have the luxury of navigating without a history of traumatic experiences. Thus, educators wishing to normalize the experiences of trauma and the affective experience of being triggered must view trigger warnings as necessary accommodations.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Laura J. Bower, MA, is a Teaching Fellow and doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at Durham University, in Durham, U.K. She is also a member of the Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse (CRiVA). As an early career researcher, her work centers around using arts-based and creative methods in exploring victim-survivor identities with people with lived experiences of sexual assault. She also enjoys teaching undergraduate criminology courses including criminological theory, research methods, and violence and abuse, inspiring her research into the lived experiences of students with trauma and disabilities.

ORCID

Laura Jane Bower [ID] http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1496-210X

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