To Warn or Not to Warn: Trigger Warnings in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in UK HE

Authors:
Karen Boyle
Melanie McCarry
Melody House

Abstract:
Although gender-based violence (GBV) in HE has received considerable attention recently, this has not, typically, extended to a concern with how experiences of GBV impact on student engagement with content about GBV. On the other hand, the emerging research evidence around trigger warnings in HE has not addressed GBV in a consistent way. This article thus aims to bring feminist work on GBV into the trigger warning debate. Drawing on our online survey of 525 teaching staff and focus groups with 42 staff and student-survivors of GBV, we argue for an epistemological shift that encourages a sharing of responsibility and an acknowledgment that there are survivors in all classrooms.

Key words/short phrases:
Trigger warnings, epistemology, safety work, gender-based violence

Key messages:
- Tutors routinely give advance information about class content, including GBV.
- Student-survivors typically use content notices to prepare to engage with materials, valuing approaches which are clear, consistent & proportionate.
- Content notices can help create conducive learning environments, acknowledging that there are survivors in all classrooms.

Introduction

As scholars of gender-based violence (GBV), we have considered how best to prepare students to engage with challenging content for some time. Yet, whilst GBV in university contexts has received considerable attention in recent years (including in Melanie McCarry's own work – see McCarry and Jones, 2021; McCarry, Jones and Kossurok, 2021), it is notable that this has not, typically, extended to a concern with how experiences of GBV impact on student engagement with content *about* GBV in the curriculum. Indeed, the immediate impetus for the research presented in this article was Karen Boyle's experience of first responder training on GBV in our own university. The training did not address the context in which Karen had received most student disclosures: in response to class *content.* On the other hand, the emerging research evidence around trigger warnings in HE has not (as we discuss below) addressed GBV in a consistent way. This article thus begins by bringing feminist work on GBV into the trigger warning debate to set up our investigation of the use of different forms of content advice in arts, humanities and social sciences. We then introduce our research and explain our methods, before presenting our findings, focusing in on four key areas: terminology; objections; process and practices; and student-survivor needs.

Although we use the term trigger warning in setting the scene for this research, as we will explain in the next section it is something of a misnomer, having become detached from its clinical origins in popular and some academic usage in ways that many find problematic. Indeed, moving beyond the terminology of trigger warnings is, we argue, one way in which we can retain some of the inclusive intent behind the popular usage of the trigger warning whilst reflecting more critically on whose responsibility it is to create spaces conducive to learning.

Context

The use of trigger warnings was popularised in the feminist blogosphere where they were initially used primarily to signal to media users where they might expect to find reference to GBV. In this usage, triggers were not understood in relation to the diagnostic criteria linked to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) specifically, rather trigger warnings were used as a means of addressing survivors more broadly with the aim of enabling them to make choices about whether, how and where to engage with content which resonated with their own experiences. This practice met with criticism from some feminist commentators. For instance, Roxanne Gay (2012) argued that trigger warnings create the *illusion* of safety and take a patronising, protectionist position towards survivors, whilst allowing structural inequalities - which more directly impact on survivors' lives - to persist. This context is important as it establishes a contested feminist lineage to the use of trigger warnings and a popular understanding of the term which is not anchored to PTSD.

As trigger warnings moved into universities, demands for their use were seen by some as posing an almost existential crisis for HE. Much of the furore related to the perceived threat to academic freedom, with claims students expected to be 'coddled' (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018) against challenging ideas (also Bass and Clark, 2015; Vatz, 2016; Proctor, 2017) and that trigger warnings could have a censorious effect (e.g., National Coalition Against Censorship 2015). There were also concerns that the demand for trigger warnings could be used to shut down the teaching of content that challenged the historically-privileged majority in HE, including content relating to structural inequalities, oppressions and violence (e.g., Cooper, 2014; Cottom, 2014; Halberstam, 2017). On the other hand, some argued that trigger warnings could support equality, accessibility and inclusion by enabling students to make informed choices about their learning (e.g., Lockhart, 2016; Byron, 2017; Fenner, 2018), *enabling* educators to continue to teach controversial or difficult material (Cares, Bostaph, Fisher, Hernandez and Daye, 2022).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given this context, research into educators' use of trigger warnings reveals that practices are far from uniform, with trigger warnings being adopted on a somewhat ad hoc basis (e.g., Kamenetz, 2016; Nolan and Roberts, 2021; Cares, Bostaph, Fisher, Hernandez and Daye, 2022). Moreover, experimental psychological research into the effects of trigger or content warnings has produced inconclusive results. For instance, in their meta-analysis, Bridgland, Jones and Bellet find that 'warnings have no effects on affective responses to negative material nor on educational outcomes' (2022, 1). Yet, they also find increases in *anticipatory* affect, leading them to conclude, 'trigger warnings in their current form are not beneficial and may instead lead to a risk of emotional harm' (Bridgland, Jones and Bellet, 2022, 1). But the meaning of this finding is not so clear. That trigger warnings

increase *anticipated* negative affect but weaken *experienced* negative affect (Gainsburg and Earl, 2018) could be interpreted as evidence that they work*:* that by allowing students to anticipate and manage their responses, the impact of the content itself is lessened. However, for our purposes, the most striking feature of the experimental literature is how far it is removed from classroom experiences, concentrating instead on the responses of individuals to receiving trigger warnings ahead of engaging with an extract from a written or filmed text (e.g., Jones, Bellet and McNally, 2020; Bruce, Stasik-O'Brien and Hoffman, 2021; Kimble, Flack, Koide, Bennion, Brenneman and Meyersburg, 2021; Kimble, Koide and Flack, 2022). This not only ignores the importance of narrative context and literary form to understandings of potentially 'triggering' material but does not allow for consideration of how participants negotiate content in a classroom.

Research which *asks* students how they use and interpret trigger and other content warnings suggests that students are also divided on the issue (e.g., Bentley, 2017; Beverly, Díaz, Kerr, Balbo, Prokopakis and Fredricks, 2018; Boysen, Prieto, Holmes, Landrum, Miller, Taylor et al, 2018; Cares, Franklin, Fisher and Bostaph, 2019). Interestingly, students' experiences of victimisation do *not* seem to have determining effect on their attitudes (Cares, Franklin, Fisher and Bostaph, 2019).

The majority of work examining student experiences of trigger and other content warnings has been conducted in the US. There is not the space here to expound on the ways that the trigger warning debate in the UK both intersects with and, in other ways is distinct from, that relating to US campuses (this is an issue we will return to in future work). However, as our own study focuses on UK students, it is relevant to note here that a recent study by Cebula, Macleod, Stone and Chan (2022) is one of the few focusing specifically on UK students. They surveyed 917 students in arts, humanities and social sciences at the University of Edinburgh, finding that students did not want to avoid sensitive topics and wanted advance information about course content to be 'accurate and proportionate' (Cebula, Macleod, Stone and Chan, 2022, 1129).

Some research has considered how students with experiences of trauma respond to such content, but this has typically been determined via self-report of diagnostic markers on a questionnaire (e.g., Dutro and Bien, 2014; Boysen, Prieto, Holmes, Landrum, Miller, Taylor et al, 2018; Boysen, Issacs, Tretter and Markowski, 2021) and not linked to specific learning experiences (which might include the decision to exit/ not participate in the first place). This work has not engaged with the kinds of scenarios we encounter in our own teaching on GBV and is curiously divorced from the now extensive body of research on GBV in universities (Bull and Shannon, 2023; Jones, Farrelly and Barter, 2024; UCU, 2016). Within that literature, there has been considerable attention devoted to the social and cultural life of universities and the extent to which they provide what Liz Kelly (2016) describes as a 'conducive context' for GBV or, more specifically, for men's violence against women (Phipps and Young, 2015). In a conducive context, women routinely undertake what Kelly (2012) calls 'safety work': actions to manage men's actual or imagined behaviour and the risk of victimisation (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Whilst these practices may not be conspicuous (both to those who perform them and to others), the labour involved is nevertheless consequential. It impacts our sense of belonging, of embodiment and on our understanding of responsibility for victimisation (Vera-Gray, 2017). Existing research has

considered safety work on campus (Roberts, 2022), but even UK universities' student safety information is exclusively focused on the campus and surrounding areas and not on safety *within* the classroom (Roberts, Doyle and Roberts, 2023). What interests us here, then, is how feminist work on gender and violence might complicate the way 'safety', risk and responsibility are understood in relation to the use of trigger warnings in university settings. If we understand that our classrooms are situated within campuses which can provide a conducive context for men's violence against women, then we need to understand that our classrooms are not neutral spaces for survivors (or, for that matter, for those who perpetrate violence). What does that mean for learning and teaching?

Our inclusion of learning *and teaching* here is deliberate: it is vital to recognise that students are not the only members of our campus communities who experience GBV. In designing our study, we wanted to place the experiences of tutors[i] and student-survivors together with the aim of disrupting the 'us v them' dichotomy which has driven much of the public debate around the use of trigger warnings. Kelly's (1988) work on the continuum of violence clearly articulates that most women have experienced some form of violence or abuse in their lifetimes and most women implement strategies of safety and resistance. Furthermore, many women do not define themselves as victims and/or survivors even where they have experienced sexual or other forms of abuse or violence. Students are not *uniquely* vulnerable in this context. Moreover, whilst we do not have space here to delve into the relationship between GBV and men's violence against women (for that see Boyle, 2019), it is important to note that the origins of this project in our work on GBV meant we were concerned with the experiences of victims and/or survivors of all genders whilst recognising that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by GBV, including on university campuses (NUS, 2011; Jones, Farrelly and Barter, 2024).

In what follows, we set the experiences and perceptions of self-identified student-survivors alongside those of tutors (some of whom are also survivors) to consider the work that trigger warnings and other forms of content advice can do in classroom environments, before returning to safety work as a context for our recommendations for practice.

Research design & methods[ii]

To establish knowledge relating to current practice, we undertook a survey of tutors in arts, humanities and social sciences on the use of 'trigger warnings' in their teaching. The survey was distributed through academic networks and mailing lists; the aim was to generate a wide range of views rather than recruit a representative sample. In advertising the survey, we deliberately used the term 'trigger warnings' given its broad usage in popular debate. However, in the survey itself we investigated the terminology and language applied in tutors' own practice. We first asked 'Do you give students advance notice of any content you cover?', then 'How do you describe these notices to students?'. To describe these notices, we offered respondents four options based on the most frequently used terms we encountered in the popular and critical debates outlined above: 'trigger warning', 'content warning', 'content note/description' and 'other (please specify)'. We went on to ask respondents about the *kind* of content for which they issued advance notice, how they gave this information, whether they had ever received requests to include notices on content, had restrictions placed on their teaching or complaints about class content. The survey was fully anonymous, with links to support information provided at the start and end of the survey.

There were 525 completed survey responses: 71.4% of respondents identified as women; 23.8% as men; 3.4% in another way; and 1.1% preferred not to say. The majority of respondents (61.3%) had been teaching over 10 years and were between the ages of 41-64 (57.3%) or 26-40 (37.5%); 51.0% were in arts and humanities subjects, 33.1% in social sciences and 15.8% working across arts, humanities and social sciences. Responses came from a range of disciplinary areas, with concentrations in Languages & Literature (23.6% of all respondents), Film, Television & Screen Studies (22.3%), Media (17.3%) and Sociology (11.8%).[iii]

Survey participants were invited to contact us to take part in a follow-up focus group to discuss the issues in more depth: these were run online so colleagues from across the UK could participate. The focus groups were designed to enable colleagues from different disciplinary and institutional contexts to discuss and explore points of commonality and tension, with questions formulated through identifying key themes and gaps in the survey data. Thirty-one survey respondents contacted us to participate in online focus groups though some scheduling difficulties meant three of these tutors were interviewed individually. Participants came from a range of disciplines and positions of seniority (from graduate teaching assistants to senior managers) and included those teaching on professionally-accredited programmes (e.g. Psychology, Law, Social Work) and on creative practice courses (e.g. Filmmaking, Theatre, Creative Writing).

As members of the communities under investigation we utilised focus groups as a mutual learning space (Wilkinson, 1998). Many participants were motivated to take part because they wanted to think critically about their practice with colleagues and this was true even of those with the most apparently fixed views. Indeed, discussing their reasons for attending our focus groups, participants frequently noted that they wanted to learn from others and the sharing of links and resources during the session was common (and facilitated by the use of Zoom). Whilst the individual interviews inevitably were more circumscribed in this sense, interviewees asked about findings from our survey and other focus groups and we shared these as appropriate, allowing interviewees to reflect on and respond to issues raised by others (including those with opposing views). All participants were invited to the two dissemination events held after the conclusion of our research and many chose to attend. These events – one online, one held on campus – were also characterised by lively discussion, indicating the need for more support in helping tutors navigate this issue.

Whilst our research with tutors was UK-wide, to recruit student-survivors we worked in partnership with Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis (GCRC) and Rape Crisis Scotland: both organisations are local to us and we have established working relationships with them. The research was also advertised at our own University, via posters at the on-campus sexual assault service and through notices on the Virtual Learning Environment for the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Recruiting in this way allowed us to ensure we could offer student participants a package of support, with a GCRC support worker co-facilitating all student focus groups and interviews. All our student participants were survivors of GBV and were currently, or previously, studying Humanities and/or Social Science subjects in Scottish universities. Participants included undergraduate, postgraduate and recently-graduated students who had studied combinations of subjects including Social Work, Social Policy, Psychology, Criminology, Law, English, History, Politics, Religious Studies and Gender Studies. Some of the participants experienced GBV *during* their studies whilst others described seeking out particular areas of study (Law, Criminology and Gender Studies) *because of* their experiences of GBV. We ran three online focus groups with eight student-

survivors, and a further three individual interviews with participants who were unable to attend the focus groups. In total there were 11 student-survivor participants. Of the 31 tutors, five self-identified as survivors in the course of the discussion and reflected on their prior experiences as students as well as their current experiences as tutors. All survey respondents and focus group/interview participants were given information about support organisations with the focus group/interview participants being given this before and at the end of the session.

All focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim and then anonymised, ensuring that identifying detail was removed. Focus group/interview participants were not asked for demographic information and where this is mentioned below is because participants chose to identify themselves in that way. A thematic approach was applied for analysis of the interview transcripts and open text survey data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved taking a recursive approach, moving back and forth between our survey data and focus group and interview data, considering tutor and student-survivor data together, to identify recurring patterns and themes through 'active' reading by all members of the research team. Through this repeated reading, we noted down words and patterns that we used to generate our initial nine codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp.87-89): emotional responses; descriptions of flagged content; discussions on care; resistance to notices; survivor narratives; disputed terms; student learning; disciplinary concerns; and workload. From there, we identified four main themes which we used to code our data: terminology; objections; processes and practices; and survivor needs. Sub- themes – relating primarily to affective language and responses - were also identified but are not discussed here. In the remainder of this article, we provide an overview of key findings structured around our four main themes.

Findings and analysis

Terminology and objections

We asked survey respondents if they gave students 'advance notice of any content' they covered: the overwhelming majority gave advance notice of content either 'routinely' (43.8%) or 'sometimes' (33.3%), with 14.7% of respondents doing so only 'rarely' and 8.2% not at all. Respondents in Film & Television were the most likely to give notice 'routinely' or 'sometimes' (81.2%) whilst respondents in Literature and Languages were the most likely to never give notice (14.5%). However, the number of respondents within individual subject areas was relatively small and patterns are difficult to interpret. As such, in what follows we do not break the findings down by discipline but highlight where disciplinary concerns emerged in open text and focus groups/interviews to highlight areas for future investigation.

Although the number of survey respondents never giving advance notice to students was small (n=43), the majority of these (53.5%) selected 'I object to use of trigger/content warnings' as the explanation for their choice. In the open-text boxes, survey respondents expanded on these objections in language familiar from public debate, expressing concerns about 'infantilising' students, failing to prepare them for 'life beyond university', 'promot[ing] the retreat from intellectual ideas' and claiming trigger/content warnings were 'at odds with academic freedom and thought'.

Survey respondents who did give advance notice of content were asked how they described these notices to students: 19.2% used the term 'trigger warnings' with many more using

'content warning' (57.5%), 'content note/description' (39.8%) and/or describing their practice 'in another way' (9.6%).[iv] In open-text responses, survey respondents noted that trigger warning was a 'loaded term' and expressed concerns relating to its use in non-clinical settings. These concerns were shared by the tutors in the focus groups/interviews. For example, one film tutor who also identified as a survivor stated:

> I don't like the idea that it's someone else's responsibility to pre-emptively warn me about things that they can't be expected to know about. So I can't be expected to do that for other people. (T3.5)[v]

This resistance to the *term* trigger warning did not mean that tutors did not give students advance information about the content of the curriculum. Indeed, even a media tutor who self-defined as a 'staunch anti-trigger warning person' (T7) recognised the importance of preparing students for course content: 'There is no way that I want them to be surprised' (T7). In light of this, in the remainder of this paper we refer to 'content notices' to encapsulate the range of practices discussed by survey respondents and focus group/interview participants.

The phrase 'heads up' was commonly used by participants to describe the intention behind content notices. Focus group/interview participants typically saw it as a courtesy, allowing students to exercise informed consent: 'you wouldn't walk into a bookshop and buy a book with a blank cover' (T5.1). This suggests that content notices are aimed at *all* students, not a specific subset of the student population. These discussions helped us make sense of the relatively widespread adoption of content notices of some kind identified in our survey despite the divisive and heated public debate on trigger warnings. Opposing groups are not always discussing the same things and opposition to trigger warnings *specifically* does not necessarily equate to resistance to adopting *some* of the practices initiated in the feminist blogosphere to alert audiences to particular kinds of content, albeit under a different label.

Given the often-fevered debate around trigger warnings and academic freedom, we wanted to know if survey respondents had had restrictions placed on what they could teach. The vast majority (93.1%) reported no such restrictions; 3.9% had restrictions placed on material 'perceived as causing distress'; 3.4% on material 'perceived as causing offence' and only 2.2% on material 'perceived as being triggering for survivors of trauma' In the open-text responses, a small number of respondents (10) described restrictions akin to religious or political censorship, often in relation to sexual content. More commonly, survey open text comments revealed tutors were involved in ongoing discussions with colleagues and students about these issues, and many described *self-imposed* restrictions based on a mixture of anxiety and critical self-reflection. These comments suggested that working out whether and how to prepare students to engage with content was an iterative and context-specific process and it is to this process that we now turn.

Processes and practices

Approaches to content notices have developed in a somewhat ad hoc way: only 3.8% of survey respondents stated their University had a policy on this issue, though more identified policies (8.8%) and/or guidance (18.5%) at Department level. Survey open text responses and tutor focus group/interview discussions revealed anxiety about what tutors could and should be doing. As one film tutor put it, to general agreement within their multi-disciplinary focus

group: 'It's fraught with danger is how it feels sometimes. It's quite a perilous place to be' (T6.2).

Survey respondents who used content notices were asked about the kinds of content they gave advance notice of: 78.4% used them for GBV, 77.4% for sexual violence, 66.2% for racism and 58.4% for suicide, with smaller but still sizable proportions for homophobia (48.2%), child abuse (45.5%), transphobia (39.7%) and misogyny (38.3%). Given the potentially contentious nature of sexual content identified above, it is a limitation that we did not ask if respondents used notices for sexually explicit content.

Survey respondents indicated that they were more likely to use content notices for lecture content (79.5% of all respondents) or seminar activities (60.4%) than prescribed texts (42.9% for fact-based texts; 29.7% for fiction), even though, as discussed above, texts have been central to the debate around trigger warnings. These patterns raised questions about what tutors expect students to *do* with content notices. Notably, tutors giving notices did not typically want or expect that students would use these to *avoid* content, but rather to *prepare* for its potential emotional impact, particularly in classroom settings (the distinction between avoidance and preparation is discussed more fully below). The rationale which tutors in our focus groups/interviews repeatedly gave for using notices was to create a better, more inclusive, learning environment for *all* students.

Some tutors reflected on, and were critical of, their own prior practice, particularly where they had given a trigger warning in a spontaneous way. One Journalism tutor described such an experience where she had given a verbal warning immediately before showing a video clip:

> I'm thinking now that doesn't work. Because it's either […] just nothing happens, and you've no idea whether people appreciate that or not, or, as has happened to me on one occasion, someone does get up and leave, and then you think, 'Well, that was really unfair on that person. I've now completely put the spotlight on them in a really awful way'. And now the rest of us are sitting here watching this thing, knowing they wouldn't have wanted to watch it. I mean it was just awful. (T3.7)

As this suggests, ineffective use of warnings can turn attention onto individual students in a way which potentially identifies their vulnerabilities and disrupts the learning experiences of others. Our student-survivor focus groups/interviews echoed this point, providing similar examples across disciplines of on-the-spot warnings which they were unable to act on effectively. For students to be able to act on content notice in a timely fashion requires forethought on the part of tutors: giving a verbal notice *during* class was something both tutors and student-survivors were critical of.

The Journalism tutor (T3.7) explained that she was an outlier in her department in providing content notices at all, noting that many of her (older, male) colleagues were explicitly antagonistic towards their use. This tutor had worked as a journalist for many years and – like a tutor in a different focus group who had returned to HE from social work practice – spoke about a potential mismatch between student expectations about the use of content notices and the unpredictability of professional practice. Whilst both were committed to ensuring students were prepared for working in their respective professions, they were also alert to the differences between *learning* and *practicing* those professions. This offers a useful caveat to the academic/real world distinction drawn by some critics of content notices, whereby

academia is regarded as a space where students can test their own boundaries and capacities in a structured way. Mirroring Cares and colleagues' (2022) findings, both tutors and student-survivors saw less need for content notices when it was already obvious - in course titles, for example - that particular content would be covered.

Some student-survivor participants echoed the concern with *anticipatory* effects which have been central to the experimental literature. As one literature student put it:

> […] giving specific warnings for what happens on specific pages is so much more helpful than just saying, 'Oh, by the way this happens in this book', and then you spend the entire time reading it like it's *Where's Wally* for trauma. (S1.3)

This level of detail was *not* widely provided, however, and tutors in our focus groups/interviews discussed the workload implications of producing detailed content notices, as well as the difficulty of being truly comprehensive. This difficulty was most clearly articulated in discussions about literary and creative disciplines where texts can be open to multiple and changing interpretations (including among students), not all of which tutors can feasibly anticipate. Tutors across a range of disciplines gave examples of content they had not thought to 'warn' students about which had proved distressing for specific students and caused them to reflect on and sometimes adapt their own practice. It was evident that their use of content advice was dynamic and changing. However, there was also a recognition, and consensus, that tutors could not and should not be able to predict student responses – though this, in itself, was often a source of anxiety.

Student-survivors' needs

A key theme to emerge in our focus groups/interviews with student-survivors was a need for clarity and consistency. Underpinning this, was a desire to know what they could, reasonably, expect from *all* tutors and what they may have to ask for. In this respect, too much advisory information could be problematic, establishing unrealistic expectations. Moreover, participants in both tutor and student-survivor focus groups/interviews reflected on situations where students had *missed* helpful content advice, because warnings had become so routinised they did not actually register, 'like the warning on a cigarette packet' (T5.1). Student-survivors expressed concern that formulaic use of notices could be patronising or tokenistic: a box-ticking exercise which then allowed tutors to present content in a way that did not take into account the actual needs of survivors. As one student-survivor put it: 'So now if you're triggered, well that's on you because we told you' (S1). That said, there was no expectation – particularly from those on professionally-accredited courses like Social Work and Law, and from those in Gender Studies – that they could or should completely *avoid* content related to GBV in their studies, professional or personal lives.

One of the contradictions inherent in the public debate about trigger warnings is that taking a stance against 'coddling' students can itself become a form of paternalism, an assumption that the tutor knows better than the student what they need. This is exemplified in a comment from a survey participant:

> Evidence shows that people experiencing trauma benefit from dealing with that trauma, not retreating from it. Mentally retreating from traumatic experiences is the worst thing that can be done for mental health and recovery.

This response was from someone who did not use content notices and objected to their usage. But note that here their generic reference to 'evidence' appears to relate to trauma *per se*: whether people experiencing trauma benefit from dealing with that trauma *in the classroom* is a rather different question. This response also does not consider whether any potential impact on *learning*. Moreover, as we have shown, from their origins in the feminist blogosphere to their current classroom usage, content notices do not solely address those with a PTSD diagnosis.

One tutor recalled how her requests for content notices when she was a student were refused. She described this as a betrayal of trust and noted that after this her attendance dropped, 'not because I didn't want to be there, but it was because I was worried. And I was told, "I don't care", basically' (T4). This participant *wanted* to attend class, she was not *retreating* from the material (as the survey respondent feared) but trying to ensure she was mentally prepared. What caused her disengagement was not the 'triggering' material, but her sense of the department's lack of care.

A student-survivor who was studying Law spoke similarly about the experience of studying sexual offences law whilst going through the criminal justice system as a rape survivor. When the content was introduced by a lecturer who she described as 'freestyling' with spontaneous in-class 'warnings', the student felt alienated and distressed:

> I spoke to the head of the Law school, and I basically said… Like you need to, at the first point of contact, first *week* of the first semester of first year, you need to get everyone in a class and explain, you know, the law is about real people. It's about real crimes happening that have a *massive* ripple effect in communities. And there are going to be difficult things discussed, and you have to make it an open forum. It can't be that, 'Oh! I've just realised that my next slide has got something that's terrible. I'm just going to tell you that you can…you can just ignore this one if you're' – [thinks] What did they say to me… 'Oh, you're a bit tearful'. Well, yes. I am. Is that not allowed? (S1.2)

This student used her position as a survivor to interrogate and problematise the way the topic was taught, asking critical questions about how teaching practice can exclude the people who have a direct stake in an issue from the production of knowledge about it. This is not a student who wants to be 'coddled' – the term used by Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) in their influential writings - but someone who wants her tutors to recognise that there are survivors in all classrooms. The epistemological shift that this student called for is one that some tutors in our focus groups/interviews also foregrounded. One, who worked in both academic and clinical health settings, noted:

> you know, any group of people we can say '1 in 4 of you, 1 in 8 of you, 1 in 10 of you, in your family there will be friends and relatives [who are victim/survivors of different forms of GBV]' So this is something for all of us. It's not just one or another individual in the room. It's with us. In ourselves, in our neighbours etcetera. (T3.6)

Like the Journalism and Social Work tutors mentioned earlier, this tutor saw the *value* of empathy as a counterpoint to what she called the 'ability to be psychopathically disinterested' (T3.6) which she suggested was sometimes necessary in order to achieve clinical outcomes, particularly in emergency contexts. None of these tutors were suggesting that students (of

Journalism, Social Work or Medicine) could or should *avoid* dealing with GBV in the context of their professional training, but rather acknowledging that their different investments in the material could provide new knowledge of value to the discipline and profession. There has been a particular concern in the wider 'trigger warning' debate that 'trigger warnings' create an environment where tutors *avoid* teaching on difficult topics, with potentially acute implications for professional competence. However, in both our student-survivor and tutor data, the emphasis was less on avoidance - though there were (relatively limited) occasions when that might be essential to an individual's wellbeing - than on appropriate *preparation* to engage with this content. Thoughtful use of content notices could make students feel recognised and cared for: indeed, that ethic of care was at times seen, by both tutors and student-survivors, as more important than the content of any advisory notice itself.

However, one student-survivor suggested that knowing how to engage with that information could at times feel like an overwhelming responsibility, speaking powerfully of the safety work (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020) this demands of student-survivors:

> The onus is once again on the victim. Like it always has been through every element of […] going through court and going through survivor groups and going through victim support. All of it comes down to the survivor, the victim. And again, it just feels a lot of the time the way trigger warnings are handled is like, it's on you to self-regulate, not on the world to be supportive. (S4)

We include this quotation not because we have an easy answer to how tutors should respond to this: we do not and nor did the student. Indeed, referring to her learning experiences this student-survivor specifically noted 'there's not a perfect solution' (S4), something that came through equally strongly in focus groups where participants often diverged in their expectations and preferences. In the long and, at times, emotional interview quoted above, the student-survivor's own desire to reclaim the power the man who had raped her had taken from her was at times in a self-consciously uneasy relationship with her frustration at her own vulnerability and desire for explicit direction from her tutors. The oscillation in this student's use of victim and survivor is an example of the point long made in feminist scholarship (e.g., Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1996) that victim and survivor are not fixed identities, but rather exist on a continuum which is not linear. Unexpectedly encountering tabloid headlines about a rape trial close to her own experience in course reading materials was triggering for this student, in the clinical meaning of the term.[vi] Importantly, this student *expected* to deal with GBV on her course and, indeed, that was part of her motivation in choosing it. A more detailed *content* note would not necessarily have helped her here as it was the *form* it took (the tabloid headlines) and the *context* in which it was encountered (a set text, read in her home) which was triggering for her. She recognised that these were not factors that her tutors could have predicted and she was also critical of the assumption that she should be identified as, in her words, 'a rape victim' in the context of the classroom and so require specific accommodations. At the same time, she noted she 'immediately had to go into therapy' as a result of this experience and it reinforced her sense that 'the world's never going to be designed for someone who's the victim of a crime' (S4).

This example demonstrates the impossibility of tutors completely avoiding trauma triggers. As one tutor who was also a survivor stated, triggers are often 'hyper specific, really subjective' (T3.5) and impossible to reliably anticipate. This does not mean content notices are useless: clearly there are benefits for *some* students. Indeed, even for the student-survivor who we quote above, whilst the content notices provided were inadequate in anticipating

triggering content, the way this information was framed by her tutors did enable her to disclose to her tutor and subsequently access support on campus. This points to the importance of thinking about the learning experience as a whole, rather than focusing on content in isolation. Student-survivors in our focus groups repeatedly indicated that content notices were most helpful if accompanied by clear guidance on class expectations (e.g. attendance requirements and information on what material is essential for accreditation or examination) and on-campus support. Whilst we can never identify all triggers, or prevent all distress, if we are honest about that and acknowledge the presence of survivors in *all* our classrooms we can perhaps work towards a *shared* responsibility for the learning environment.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that survivors' encounters in the classroom can also be the means through which they come to recognise their own experiences, as was the case for a Criminology student whose experience of rape – which had not been taken seriously by the police – was made newly comprehensible through a classroom discussion. This student also highlighted the importance of making sure that information about support services is clearly signposted to *all* students, something tutors also thought was crucial. One tutor, who was also a survivor, expressed some concern over routinised signposting in cases where students are distressed, arguing:

> ... whilst obviously professional services are sometimes needed for students, I think that there's a slight sort of grey area where, and I have experienced this professionally, where somebody that is triggered by something is then seen as somehow 'broken', or in need of 'fixing'. So, the reflex to say, 'Oh, we can direct you to this professional service', and, actually, that may be exactly what they need. So, I'm not saying that we're in the position to make that individual choice by any means. […] But equally, if they're sort of, if they're acknowledging something that they're being triggered by, to then sort of reflex that that they need to be sort of see someone and talk about it who can then 'fix' them is actually re-traumatising. (T5.2)

This experience was echoed by other survivors in both survey responses and focus groups/interviews who did not want to be *defined* by their trauma. Addressing content notices and support information to *all* students means that individuals are not targeted in ways that can reinforce their sense of stigma or remove their agency as learners and survivors.

That survivors' responses to our research (whether as tutors or students) were not entirely uniform should not, of course, be surprising. In our conclusion, we consider how we might find a way through these contradictions to provide content notices which best meet the most needs.

Conclusion

Existing research which makes claims that trigger warnings and related content advice don't work – and may even be harmful – have rarely looked at teaching and learning practice, or considered how students and staff understand their own experiences. In this research we sought to explore what is happening in UK HE *and* what tutors and student-survivors think about it to help us think through our own classroom practice *and* our approach to training first responders to GBV in universities.

All staff focus group/interview participants, and many of the survey open text comments, demonstrated a commitment to creating an inclusive learning environment and avoiding harm as far as possible. But it was not always clear to tutors how best to achieve this, and the febrile nature of the debate both within and outside of universities has created anxiety. Our research offers evidence that part of the problem may be that different practices have become grouped together under the term 'trigger warning'. An important first step, then, is for colleagues to be clear with each other, and with students, what they mean by the terms they use. There are good reasons to resist the term 'trigger warning', not least that we cannot predict what is triggering for trauma survivors. But content notices do not have to be specifically aimed at trauma survivors or narrowly focused on avoiding 'triggers': they can have a role in creating a learning space where student-survivors feel included regardless of clinical diagnoses. Acknowledging that learning about topics such as GBV is not theoretical for a lot of people in the room can open up new ways of thinking. Being mindful that survivors occupy all positions in universities also increases student agency as it is no longer the responsibility of tutors to protect them, but rather everyone's responsibility to create an inclusive learning and teaching environment.

Of course, a singular model will not always be possible, or desirable, at the macro level. Indeed, some tutors were wary about the imposition of an institution-wide approach, which they feared would be bureaucratic and meaningless to students. Nevertheless, ensuring that a clear and consistent approach is taken within units of learning and that students with specific needs know how to make these known and have confidence that tutors will respond appropriately, is important.

In terms of the content advice itself, our conclusion is that providing short, factual descriptions of course content as a matter of routine is helpful.[vii] These descriptions need to be available *in advance* but do not need to be flagged as a 'trigger warning': indeed, it might be counterproductive to do so as this implies that this information is only of relevance to a subset of students. That said, given students are familiar with the term 'trigger warning' from their engagements with popular culture, it is wise to clarify with students why they are not used, explaining where information about class content can be accessed and what mechanisms are in place for students who have specific accommodations. It is also useful to be alert not only to *content* but to the *way* that content is delivered (e.g. by noting when video material, tabloid headlines or graphic images will be used in class). There is, however, a balance to be struck. Being over-comprehensive in content advice can be counter-productive: establishing unrealistic expectations of other tutors, leading to students 'tuning out' and missing information they do need, and establishing an illusion of safety. Stating the obvious can also be perceived as patronising: a course that is explicitly *about* GBV, for instance, does not need to repeatedly reiterate this each week: information about the nature and range of material to be covered in a specific session is more helpful.

Even with the most robust processes in place, some students *will* become distressed and even triggered (in the clinical sense) by course content. We cannot create genuinely 'safe' spaces in a world that is not safe. Here we want to return to Vera-Gray and Kelly's (2020) discussion of 'safety work'. In their usage, safety work is not work that *actually* guarantees safety from GBV: that requires men to desist from violence. In this sense, safety work is arguably akin to Gay's critique of trigger warnings: it creates the *illusion* of safety. But even if safety is illusory, the *work* is material: it involves emotional energy, material resource and time. However, to abandon that work completely is also untenable when the broader context has not

changed. What we are arguing for here is the sharing of responsibility for that work so that it does not fall solely on the shoulders of those already impacted by GBV, inequalities and adverse experiences. As we have argued, this is not simply about managing risk but can be seen more positively as involving an epistemological shift which can benefit disciplines and professions.

Finally, given the exploratory nature of this research we recommend that future studies more systematically compare approaches and experiences within and across disciplines and institutions. Whilst we have commented briefly on the impact of professional accreditation and expectations in this article, a more sustained consideration of these issues would be beneficial, as would a more detailed examination of the issues raised in craft-based subjects (such as creative writing, theatre and filmmaking). Our own interest has been primarily on gender-based violence, but there is clearly scope to undertake more sustained work on how content notices are/not used, understood and experienced by students with other adverse experiences, from poverty to bereavement and mental health issues.

A number of departments have already picked up and are implementing our guidance in the development of policies and practices around trigger warnings and content advice. Continued evaluation involving both tutors and students will be key to ensuring these policies and practices are meeting students' needs, particularly in increasingly resource-strapped institutions where pressures on student support services are acute and staff workloads untenable (UCU, 2021). In this context, it is important to stress that content notices can never be a substitute for well-resourced student (and staff) support services. Likewise, content notices will not, in themselves, undo the conducive context for GBV on campuses, nor dismantle other inequalities within the classroom. But they can be a stepping stone in changing how knowledge is constructed and that is valuable in itself.

Funding

This research was funded by a BA/Leverhulme Small Grant, SRG22\221390

Conflicts of Interest

The Authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

References

Bass, S.A. and Clark, M.L. (2015) The gravest threat to colleges comes from within, *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* September 28, 2015. https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-gravest-threat-to-colleges-comes-from-within/

Bentley, M. (2017) Trigger warnings and the student experience, *Politics,* 37(4): 470-485. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716684526.

Beverly, E.A., Díaz, S., Kerr, A.M., Balbo, J.T., Prokopakis, K.E. and Fredricks, T.R. (2018) Students' perceptions of trigger warnings in medical education, *Teaching and Learning in Medicine,* 30(1): 5-14. doi: 10.1080/10401334.2017.1330690.

Boyle, K. (2019) What's in a name? Theorising the inter-relationships of gender and violence, *Feminist Theory* 20 (1): 19-36. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1464700118754957.

Boysen, G.A., Prieto, L.R., Holmes, J.D., Landrum, R.E., Miller, R.L., Taylor, A.K.,White, J.N. and Kaiser, D.J. (2018) Trigger warnings in Psychology classes: What do students think?, *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 4(2): 69-80. https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000106.

Boysen, G.A., Issacs, R.A., Tretter, L. and Markowski, S. (2021) Trigger warning efficacy: The impact of warnings on affect, attitudes, and learning, *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 7(1): 39-52. https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000150.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in Psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Bridgland, V., Jones, P. and Bellet, B. (2022) A meta-analysis of the effects of trigger warnings, content warnings and content notes. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/qav9m (pre-print)

Bruce, M. J., Stasik-O'Brein, S.M. and Hoffmann, H. (2021) Students' psychophysiological reactivity to trigger warnings, *Current Psychology*, 42, 5470-5479. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01895-1.

Bull, A. and Shannon, E. (2023) *Higher Education After #MeToo: Institutional Responses to Reports of Gender-Based Violence and Harassment.* York, UK: The 1752 Group/ University of York. https://1752group.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/higher-education-after-metoo_full-report-1.pdf.

Byron, K. (2017) From infantilizing to world making: Safe spaces and trigger warnings on campus, *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 66: 116-125. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12233.

Cares, A. C., Franklin, C.A., Fisher, B.S. and Bostaph , L.G. (2019) 'They were there for people who needed them': Student attitudes toward the use of trigger warnings in Victimology classrooms." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 30(1): 22-45. https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2018.1433221.

Cares, A.C., Bostaph, L.G., Fisher, B.S., Hernandez, A.M. and Daye, S. (2022) 'The subject matter should be an adequate trigger warning': How and why Criminology and Criminal Justice faculty use (and don't use) trigger warnings, *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 34(4): 598-616. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10511253.2022.2133154.

Cebula, K., Macleod, G., Stone, K. and Chan, S.W.Y. (2022) Student experiences of learning about potentially emotionally sensitive topics: Trigger warnings are not the whole story, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(8): 1120-1134. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2022.2055449.

Cooper, B. (2014) No trigger warnings in my classroom. Why you won't find them on my syllabi, *Salon,* May 20, 2014. https://www.salon.com/2014/05/20/no_trigger_warnings_in_my_class_why_you_won%E2%80%99t_find_them_on_my_syllabi/ .

Cottom, T.M. (2014) The trigger warned syllabus. (blog). March, 2014. https://tressiemc.com/uncategorized/the-trigger-warned-syllabus/.

Dutro, E. and Bein, A.C. (2014) Listening to the speaking wound: A Trauma Studies perspective on student positioning in schools, *American Educational Research Journal,* 51(1): 7-35. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831213503181.

Fenner, S. (2018) Not so scary: Using and defusing content warnings in the classroom, *Journal of Political Science Education,* 14(1): 86-96. https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2017.1359095.

Gainsburgh, I. and Earl, A. (2018) Trigger warnings as an interpersonal emotion-regulation tool: Avoidance, attention, and affect depend on beliefs, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* 79: 252-263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.08.006.

Gay, R. (2012) The illusion of safety/ the safety of illusion, *The Rumpus.* August, 28 2012. https://therumpus.net/2012/08/28/the-illusion-of-safetythe-safety-of-illusion/

Halberstam, J. (2017) Trigger happy: From content warning to censorship, *Signs,* Winter. (Currents: Feminist Key Concepts and Controversies). http://signsjournal.org/currents-trigger-warnings/halberstam/.

Jones, C., Farrelly, N. and Barter, C. (2024) UK prevalence of university student and staff experiences of sexual violence and domestic abuse: A systematic review from 2002 to 2022, *European Journal of Higher Education*, 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2024.2302568

Jones, P. J., Bellet, B.W. and McNally. R.J. (2020) Helping or harming? The effect of trigger warnings on individuals with trauma histories, *Clinical Psychological Science,* 8(5): 905-917. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2167702620921341.

Kamenetz, A. (2016) Half of professors in NPR Ed survey have used 'Trigger Warnings'. *NPR* 7 September 7, 2016. https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/09/07/492979242/half-of-professors-in-npr-ed-survey-have-used-trigger-warnings?t=1614958676468&t=1614959066521.

Kelly, L. (1988) *Surviving Sexual Violence*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Kelly, L. (2012) Standing the test of time? Reflections on the concept of the continuum of sexual violence. In J. Brown and S. Walklate (eds) *Handbook on Sexual Violence,* London: Routledge, pp. xvii–xxvi.

Kelly, L. (2016) The conducive context of violence against women and girls, *Discover Society,* 30. March 1, 2016. https://archive.discoversociety.org/2016/03/01/theorising-violence-against-women-and-girls/

Kelly, L., Burton, S. and Regan, L. (1996) Beyond victim or survivor: Sexual violence, identity and feminist theory and practice, in L. Adkins and V. Merchant (eds) *Sexualizing the Social: Power and the Organization of Sexuality*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp.77-101.

Kimble, M., Koide, J. and Flack, W.F. (2022) Student responses to differing trigger warnings: A replication and extension, *Journal of American College Health*, 72 (6): 1668-1671. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35882054/.

Kimble, M., Flack, W., Koide, J., Bennion, K., Brenneman, M. and Meyersburg. C. (2021) Student reactions to traumatic material in literature: Implications for trigger warnings, *PLoS One*, 16 (3): e0247579. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0247579.

Lockhart, E.A. (2016) Why trigger warnings are beneficial, perhaps even necessary, *First Amendement Studies*, 50(2): 59-69. https://doi.org/10.1080/21689725.2016.1232623.

Lukianoff, G. and Haidt, J. (2018) *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ides are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin.

McCarry, M. and Jones, C. (2021) The equality paradox: sexual harassment and gender inequality in a UK university, *Journal of Gender Studies* 31 (8): 928-940. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.2007471

McCarry, M., Jones, C. and Kossurok, A. (2021) Research report: Equally Safe on campus, University of Strathclyde. https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/135406739/McCarry_etal_2021_ESCU_Equally_safe_on_campus.pdf.

National Coalition Against Censorship (2015) "What's all this about trigger warnings?" *Censorship News*, Fall. https://ncac.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CN_123_FNL.pdf.

NUS (2011) Hidden marks: A study of women students' experiences of harassment, stalking, violence and sexual assault, National Union of Students. https://assets.prod.unioncloud-internal.com/document/documents/60237/aa3daeedd93a84cbc2aabc654f463f40/Hidden_Marks_report.pdf

Nolan, H. A. and Roberts, L. (2021) Medical educators' views and experiences of trigger warnings in teaching sensitive content, *Medical Education* 55: 1273-1283. https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14576.

Phipps, A. and Young, I. (2015) Neoliberalisation and 'lad culture' in higher education, *Sociology*, 49(2): 305–22. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0038038514542120

Proctor, W. (2017) The new media effects: Trigger warnings in the classroom, *Critical Studies in Television Blog*, April 24, 2017. https://cstonline.net/the-new-media-effects-trigger-warnings-in-the-classroom-by-william-proctor/.

Roberts, N. (2022) The dark and desolate campus: what can be done to enhance students' perceptions of safety on-campus?, *Safer Communities*, 21(3): 157–70. https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/sc-01-2022-0006/full/html.

Roberts, N., Doyle, L. and Roberts., M. (2023) Deconstructing dangerous discourse: an analysis of personal safety advice to students on UK universities' websites, *Journal of Gender Based Violence*, 9(1): 58-75. https://doi.org/10.1332/23986808Y2023D000000005

UCU (2016) *Dealing with Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Guidance for Branches and Members*, London: University and College Union. https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8373/Dealing-with-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace/pdf/Dealing_with_sexual_harassment_in_the_workplace_guidance_Nov_2016.pdf.

UCU (2021) *Workload Survey 2021: Data Report*, London: University and College Union https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12905/UCU-workload-survey-2021-data-report/pdf/WorkloadReportJune22.pdf.

Vatz, R.E. (2016) The academically destructive nature of trigger warnings, *First Amendment Studies*, 50(2): 51-58. https://doi.org/10.1080/21689725.2016.1230508

Vera-Gray, F. (2017) *Men's Intrusion, Women's Embodiment: A Critical Analysis of Street Harassment*. London: Routledge.

Vera-Gray, F. and Kelly, L. (2020) Contested gendered space: public sexual harassment and women's safety work, *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 44(4): 265–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2020.1732435.

Wilkinson, S. (1998) Focus groups in feminist research: Power, interaction, and the co-construction of meaning, *Women's Studies International Forum* 21: 111–25. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(97)00080-0.

[i] We refer to staff with teaching responsibilities as 'tutors' to avoid the use of job titles which could be identifying.

[ii] Ethical approval: was granted by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee, UEC22/78Boyle/McCarry.

[iii] Respondents were asked to indicate all disciplinary areas in which they taught: many indicated more than one.

[iv] Respondents who indicated they used advance notice of content (*n*=482) selected all the terms they used to describe these notices: many used more than one term and so the figures are for the proportion of respondents using each term.

[v] All participants in focus groups/interviews were assigned a code based on whether they were tutors (T) or students (S): T2.1 or S2.1 denote focus group 2 and their number within that, interviews are represented by a single numeral. The open text survey data presented in this article is unattributed due to the anonymity of the survey method.

[vi] This student shared with us that she had PTSD and she used the word 'triggering' to describe this experience.

[vii] Text and video summaries of our recommendations are available at: https://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/departmentofhumanities/journalism/triggerwarnings/