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Institutional Reactions to Trigger Warning Requests: Thoughts on Kimble et al.

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Abstract
Trigger warnings are alerts provided to help people prepare for and perhaps avoid forthcoming material or experiences that could trigger memories and reactions to past aversive events. Recent research, including the target study here by Kimble and colleagues, has taken an individualistic approach to studying trigger warnings. Their focus has been primarily on trigger warnings' impact on avoidance, anxiety, and coping. These studies help provide evidence-based guidance on trigger warning use and deployment after a period of advocacy and discussion that lacked such data. In this commentary, I review the growing body of empirical work on trigger warnings, including the proposed benefits and risks of their use. I also aim to place Kimble and colleagues' work in context among these studies and offer ideas of expanding future studies to include an institutional lens. Such research holds promise in clarifying concerns on campus that might be underlying trigger warning requests and finding ways to better serve students.

Keywords Trigger warnings · Higher education · Anxiety · Avoidance

"Trigger warnings" are alerts provided to help people prepare for and perhaps avoid forthcoming material or experiences that could trigger memories and reactions to past aversive events (Bridgland et al., 2022, 2023). Their deployment and use have been at the center of debate in higher education for several years. While they originated in online support groups for survivors of gender-based violence (Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015), institutions of higher education deploy trigger warnings and develop relevant policies to prevent harm (Wilson, 2015). Requests for trigger warnings in the classroom corresponded to increasing attention to campus sexual assault (Bruce & Roberts, 2020). In the target study, Kimble and colleagues (2023) provide important data on how particular students respond to trigger

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warnings. Suggested future directions of research include understanding the institutional and cultural contexts in which trigger warnings are being requested. The growing body of empirical work on trigger warnings can help with the decision to provide these warnings or not, and what other actions institutions of higher education can take to support students.

Individual Focus in the Trigger Warning Literature

Kimble and colleagues (2023) studied individual students and how they respond when presented with trigger warnings. This focus follows much of the extant empirical literature. Currently, there is a growing consensus answering three main questions: do trigger warnings prompt people to avoid material, do trigger warnings help people emotionally brace for and cope with reactions to the material, and do trigger warnings prime anticipatory anxiety about the upcoming material?

Trigger warnings were initially developed to help people either avoid material that could catalyze symptoms of their condition (most commonly posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD) or be prepared to cope with distress caused by their engagement. One of the original concerns about trigger warnings is that they would prompt behavioral avoidance, which could not only affect academic performance but also serve to maintain anxiety. Kimble and colleagues (2023) did not find support for this concern, with 94% of their 185 participants choosing to read material with a trigger warning. Only about 5% of the participants chose an alternative reading because they, "expected [the trigger-warned material] would be unpleasant," or, they were, "afraid [they] would be triggered emotionally." My colleagues and I (Bruce et al., 2021) found similar results in our study of psychophysiological reactivity in response to trigger warnings in which participants were given a choice to opt out of a warned-about video. No participant opted out in our study of 106 of participants. Bridgland et al.'s (2022, 2023) meta-analysis of five studies focusing on behavioral avoidance across a total of 2756 participants determined an overall negligible effect of trigger warnings, and their latest studies actually suggest a "forbidden fruit" phenomenon in which people seek out the material with warnings (Bridgland et al., 2022). It would seem that concerns of behavioral avoidance in response to trigger warnings are unsupported.

To determine how trigger warnings may prompt coping strategies to deal with upcoming content, many studies, including Kimble's, have examined distress after trigger warning deployment. The most consistent finding is increased anticipatory anxiety between the time the trigger warning is deployed and the time material is accessed. Small to medium effect sizes are seen when participants self-report anticipatory distress (Boysen et al., 2021; Bridgland & Takarangi, 2021; Gainsburg & Earl, 2018), and the one study using psychophysiological measures to capture anticipatory distress found a large effect (Bruce et al., 2021).

When examining affective distress shortly after reading warned-about material, the literature shows mixed results. Some studies show a small effect for trigger warnings linked to lessened distress (Sanson et al., 2019), whereas other studies show a small effect of more distress (Kimble et al., 2023; Bellet et al., 2020). However, at the aggregate level, Bridgland and colleagues' (2022, 2023) meta-analysis of nine studies determined a trivial effect, meaning that in general, trigger warnings have little to no effect on affective responses to the material immediately after seeing it. Kimble's current study (2023) expanded the timeframe for reactivity and found that by two weeks after reading the material, any initial distress has alleviated. This pattern was true regardless of trauma history as well. Taken together, this suggests that many people become somewhat needlessly anxious after seeing a trigger

warning and not other warnings, and that any distress in response to the material is minor and short-lived, regardless of what warning was presented. This pattern raises the question: why provide a trigger warning compared to other ways of communicating upcoming themes that do not create the same distress?

Institutional and Cultural-Level Focus in Studying Trigger Warnings

Much of the relevant literature focuses on individuals' receptivity to and use of trigger warnings. Future research may benefit from investigating and increasing understanding of the broader context in which requests for classroom trigger warnings are being made. Several investigators claim that the act of deploying trigger warnings communicates a sensitivity to students' concerns and an effort to be helpful to them (Cares et al., 2018). Perhaps part of the controversy surrounding trigger warnings is that they may be reflecting larger issues on campus and beyond. Here, I review the possible issues tied to the trigger warning debate as well as ideas to study and bring resolution to them.

Concerns About Institutional Narratives

By definition, trigger warnings are different from other ways of labeling content in that their intended purpose is to help those who, through personally challenging experiences, have been left vulnerable to specific material (Bridgland et al., 2022, 2023). Trigger warnings were developed and discussed in the context of helping those who have been victimized (Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015) and are indeed recognized as an accommodation for those with trauma and PTSD (Nolan & Roberts, 2022). As such, trigger warnings are not just informational taglines about upcoming themes; they also communicate assumptions about trauma and its recovery, for example, that those who experience trauma need to navigate consuming media differently because of what they have been through. The assumption, overt or otherwise, that trauma survivors are vulnerable and in need of accommodation when navigating day-to-day tasks carries its own risks.

When an institution or person in power, such as a professor, endorses a message that overestimates the risk of developing a debilitating condition, those who endure trauma but otherwise would have likely remained resilient are at risk to interpret normative stress as indicative of psychopathology. Daily activities being interrupted due to trauma is seen in PTSD, but while trauma is not an uncommon experience (82.8% of US adults reporting exposure; Breslau, 2009), PTSD is rare (6.8% lifetime prevalence; Kessler et al., 2005). Also, overly negative interpretations of otherwise common and expected stress symptoms are a strong predictor of worsened distress and PTSD development (Ehlers et al., 1998). The idea that experiencing trauma irreparably shapes how one continues forward is captured in a concept dubbed, "trauma centrality," and refers to the degree to which a person sees the trauma as a turning point in their life and as a reference point for approaching the future (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006). Heightened trauma centrality is more predictive of PTSD than exposure to the initial event itself (Bernard et al., 2015), and reducing this factor in psychotherapy reduces PTSD symptoms (Boals & Murrell, 2016). Trauma centrality has already been correlated to trigger warning use, request, and receptivity (Jones et al., 2020), regardless of level of PTSD (Bruce & Stasik-O'Brien, 2023).

In this sense, providing trigger warnings may be akin to family accommodation in treating anxiety-related disorders. Family accommodation refers to relatives who, often with kind intent, make changes to their behavior to help alleviate potential distress in their relative, but in doing so, actually inadvertently help maintain the anxiety symptoms long term (Lebowitz et al., 2016). Examples include helping a relative with obsessive compulsive disorder engage in checking behavior or other safety behaviors when approaching feared situations. The person dealing with anxiety then may not engage with experiences that would either allow fear extinction or offer corrective information showing them that they can tolerate anxious thoughts, uncertainty, and anxious arousal. Trigger warnings may serve as this kind of problematic accommodation, unnecessarily (and often subjectively) referring to material as needing special consideration for certain populations, and assuming those populations need such warnings. Long-term consequences of institutions reinforcing these narratives about trauma through trigger warning policies have not been studied, but the extant literature supports hypotheses suggesting possible harm in discussing trauma from this framework.

Trigger Warning Requests may Signal an Unmet, Legitimate Need

While the trigger warning debate has been contentious at times, a common thread includes wanting to help students navigate adversity. Our study examining possible predictors of trigger warning receptivity did not suggest trait-like anxiety or PTSD as driving requests (Bruce & Roberts, 2020). Rather, a variable termed “institutional betrayal” correlated positively and most strongly with trigger warning receptivity and appreciation. Institutional betrayal assesses, in part, experiences in which one depended on an institution to respond to mistreatment or trauma, and the institution violated said trust. Notably, the trigger warning debate became a hot-button issue near the same time as increased attention to the high numbers of campus sexual assaults as well as administrators’ mishandling of them. Current estimates suggest that 1 in 4 women in undergraduate programs experience rape or sexual assault (Cantor et al., 2020). About half of survivors report subsequent experiences of institutional betrayal, which in turn worsens posttraumatic sequalae (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Institutional betrayal in this study included acts ranging from creating an environment where sexual violence is seen as “no big deal” to outright cover-ups of accusations. And although about 80% of university counseling centers report providing services to campus sexual assault survivors, practitioners there report “supportive counseling” as more efficacious and more frequently used compared to evidence-based treatments for PTSD (Artime & Buchholz, 2016), meaning that current support services meeting this demand are more often not empirically informed.

Trigger warning requests may be less about navigating the classroom in an arguably avoidant way and more about receiving some recognition of what students may be enduring. Requesting a trigger warning may be an incomplete litmus test of how emotionally safe or sensitive a professor or the college would be toward a student. Without the historical and emotional context behind what a trigger warning may symbolize, denial of a request to provide warnings may have been understood as an overgeneralized denial of students’ concerns. That said, various sides of the trigger warning debate can likely agree that students can and do endure events that their university would not want them to endure, and more could be done to redress these issues using the best available evidence-based guidance.

Practice Recommendations

Informed by the current literature, what should a professor do in deciding whether or not to deploy a trigger warning? My answer would be two-fold. If teaching about sensitive topics, such as mental illness, injustices, and trauma, a professor may elect to provide an informational comment about course material ahead of time. However, advocating for broader changes in how campuses prevent and manage trauma would be likely to address more core issues.

Recently, my partner and I saw a community play about World War II from the perspective of an Army nurse and the three women whom she wrote to for support. The night started with remarks from the director, who, while introducing the play, noted that we would hear, "sound effects, like cannonballs hitting water, coming from the two speakers in the far corners," and see, "lights moving—not strobing—but moving with the actors." I understood her comments to be meeting the same aims as providing a trigger warning, perhaps to veterans with PTSD and those with epilepsy, but without making assumptions about who may be vulnerable to such material, who may need additional help, and what help they may have needed. She provided this information in just that tone: informational. I have taken the same approach in my courses, and students have expressed their appreciation.

My second recommendation would be for faculty and administrators to understand the climate on campus when it comes to violence and addressing victimization. Recent research is taking an increasingly expanded approach to understanding the institutional contexts in which this violence occurs (e.g., Holland et al., 2018 on mandated reporting of sexual assault). Implementing best practices from the empirical literature will likely go a long way in meaningfully supporting students.

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