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**“They Were There for People Who Needed Them”:**

**Student Attitudes Toward the Use of Trigger Warnings in Victimology Classrooms**

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**Abstract**

Over the last five years, vigorous debate has been waged about the purpose, use, and impact of trigger warnings in courses offered at institutions of higher education. This debate has been largely uninformed by research findings. This study fills this gap using quantitative and qualitative data collected via surveys in a large undergraduate victimology course to explore student attitudes toward trigger warnings. Findings revealed considerable, but nuanced support for trigger warning use in victimology courses. Support does not appear to differ between crime victims and non-victims; support is higher among females than males. These findings underscore that universal decisions mandating or advocating for or against the use of trigger warnings are premature. Further study is needed with a diverse range of samples to gain a fuller picture of student attitudes about trigger warnings as well as to assess any impact of trigger warnings use on student behavior and learning.

Keywords: Teaching; Pedagogy; Trigger Warning; Victimology; Content Warning

## **Introduction**

College and university faculty use of trigger warnings in courses has been a source of controversy over the last five years (Hanlon, 2015; Johnston, 2014; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Manne, 2015). The debate underlying the purpose, use, and impact of trigger warnings is passionate on both sides. Advocates see trigger warnings as an indispensable component of teaching about potentially traumatic topics, which allow more students to engage in learning without being re-traumatized or suffering negative effects of revictimization. Opponents from both inside and outside academe claim students are being coddled and allowed to avoid material that makes them uncomfortable. Critics also argue that classroom discussions are being curtailed, relevant material is being omitted, and the academic freedom of faculty is being compromised. Despite vigorous debate, claims on each side largely lack grounding in empirical research from college and university students regarding their attitudes on trigger warnings. The current study, with its focus on student attitudes toward trigger warnings and their reactions to trigger warnings used during an undergraduate victimology course, is a logical next step to filling this gap. The findings reported here are among the first contributions to this debate that are grounded in data from students.

## **Background**

### **A Brief History of Trigger Warnings**

We define trigger warnings, also sometimes referred to as content notifications or content warnings (Halberstam, 2017; Laguardia, Michalsen, & Rider-Milkovich, 2016), as written or oral notifications of course content meant to provide students advance notice of sensitive material that may produce adverse mental health responses and, therefore, inhibit academic performance. This definition is important as the content and purpose of trigger warnings has been viewed

differently by those for and against their use, thus fueling the acrimony of the ensuing debate. Trigger warnings are largely claimed to have originated online (Essig, 2014; Manne, 2015), especially in the feminist blogosphere (Marcotte, 2013). While little is known about the nature and extent of trigger warnings in courses, anecdotal information offers some insight on their use in campus classrooms. Evidence of their use in higher education settings, at least in act if not in name, predated blogging. References exist of their use as early as the 1980's (e.g., Newman, 1999; Phillips, 1988). They may appear in writing (e.g., on a syllabus, in assignment instructions, via email, notification via course management software), as an oral statement to a class, or in both forms (Boysen, Wells, & Dawson, 2016; Manne, 2015). Trigger warnings may occur once (e.g., at the beginning of a course) or throughout the course before the introduction of specific content (e.g., photograph, video, book chapter). Content warnings may be accompanied by a list of support resources accessible to students, should they need them (Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009). Faculty also have provided information to students on possible negative reactions to the triggering material to normalize the range of responses that students might experience and provide self-care avenues (e.g., Barlow & Becker-Blease, 2012). Other faculty have included an "opt out" for students to altogether avoid potentially triggering material (NCAC, 2015).

### **Potential Benefits of Trigger Warnings**

**Trauma-centered.** Despite noteworthy criticisms, trigger warnings have been employed with the intention of accommodating students who have trauma histories to enhance the learning environment. Indeed, over half of college students have experienced at least one potentially traumatic event in their lifetime (Boyratz, Granda, Parker, Tidwell, & Waits, 2016; Elhai, Miller, Ford, Biehn, Pamieri, & Frueh, 2012). Bernat et al. (1998) found that, of those college students who had experienced trauma, more than 10% exceeded the diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic

Stress Disorder (PTSD) at the time of study. Others have found between 5% and 9% of the college student population has met the criteria for PTSD (Boyraz, Granda, Parker, Tidwell, & Waits, 2016; Elhai et al., 2012).

Experiencing trauma and resulting PTSD may inhibit student academic achievement. Students with PTSD have reported significantly lower GPAs and were more likely to leave their institution of higher education (by dropping out or transferring) compared to students without PTSD (Bachrach & Read, 2012; Boyraz, Granda, Parker, Tidwell, & Waits, 2016). Research has linked PTSD with adverse emotional and physiological responses. For those with PTSD, textual cues can lead to higher levels of stressful memories, voluntary and involuntary retrieval of those memories, and emotional intensity of those memories (Rubin, Boals, & Berntsen, 2008), and that images (i.e., pictures) are related to physiological reactions, such as increased heart rate and skin conductance response (Suendermann, Ehlers, Boellinghaus, Gamer, & Glucksman, 2010; Wahbeh & Oken, 2013). Trigger warnings are intended to minimize the chances of an adverse response and provide students with the tools and resources to assist in coping with this response if it occurs (Manne, 2015; Newman, 2016). A trauma or victimization undermines an individual's sense of control (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983) – trigger warnings are a small scale, yet positive, attempt to re-establish a survivor's sense of control (Cares, Hirschel, & Williams, 2014; Boysen, 2017). As such, proponents of trigger warnings have focused on the potential for these strategies to improve students' learning and access to education (Carter, 2015; Laguardia, Michalsen, & Rider-Milkovich, 2016). Moreover, the nature by which trauma histories and PTSD from victimization interfere with learning can be viewed as a disability issue necessitating accommodation (Rae, 2016). Ultimately, trigger warnings acknowledge that

students with mental health issues (i.e., PTSD and other trauma-related disorders) deserve access to an educational experience that fully facilitates their participation (Rae, 2016).

**Learning-centered.** The use of trigger warnings to address the “whole student” recognizes that each individual comes to class with unique experiences that will impact how they engage with course material (The American Historian, 2015). This student-centered approach (NCAC, 2015; Newman, 2016) has laid the foundation for quality class interaction and discussion, which, in turn, could improve students’ overall educational experience. Trigger warnings are consistent with the student-centered tradition of talking with students about upcoming course content so they can anticipate the best approach to process the material and be prepared for class discussion (Wyatt, 2016), much like warning students that a course reading is lengthy so they can plan adequate time to complete it (Hanlon, 2015). This approach reflects faculty respect for students and their time and effort, as well as showing faculty interest in student achievement. A resulting discussion, which maximizes engagement by all students, models how to have informed and appropriate dialogue about sensitive topics (NCAC, 2015). On the flip side, “surprises” in class, particularly negative ones, can distract students and undermine the learning environment (Johnston, 2014). Finally, these benefits accrue from a proactive approach that is short and easy to do (Manne, 2015).

### **Potential Costs of Trigger Warnings**

**Trauma-centered.** There has been considerable criticism focused on how trigger warnings harm individual students, undermine learning and the goals of education, and threaten faculty academic freedom. Rather than supporting students, opponents argue trigger warnings are harmful to students with trauma histories or PTSD (Lukianoff, & Haidt, 2015; McNally, 2016). The potential number of triggers is endless, so it is impossible, particularly in a class that features

student-inspired discussion, to protect students from being triggered (Wyatt, 2016). To claim otherwise falsely implies that faculty can protect students (Wyatt, 2016). Based on their reading of research on cognitive-behavioral treatment for trauma, opponents see trigger warnings as the wrong approach (Chait, 2015; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; McNally, 2016). Opponents posit that trigger warnings enable avoidance when exposure is more appropriate. While the classroom is not a treatment context, some opponents have argued that exposure to triggering material in the classroom is consistent with the appropriate treatment approach (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Robbins, 2016). These critics see trigger warnings as counter-therapeutic because they encourage avoidance (McNally, 2016).

**Learning-centered.** Opponents have argued trigger warnings are antithetical to learning because they allow students to choose which course content they are exposed to and avoid material that makes them uncomfortable or with which they disagree (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; note that this criticism assumes trigger warnings include an “opt-out” clause). Allowing students to avoid course material that challenges pre-existing beliefs undermines the authors’ understanding that “real learning” (NCAC, 2015, p. 8) is hard work that involves engaging with a diverse set of often conflicting and competing ideas (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Therefore, this is part of coddling and infantilizing college students (AAUP, 2014; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; NCAC, 2015). This approach, opponents have suggested, creates a classroom and campus climate that does not prepare students for the professional world, which will include people and ideas that produce discomfort and will not include advance warning of material (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Wyatt, 2016).

Additionally, opponents have suggested that providing advance notice to students in anticipation of sensitive material conditions them as to what they should think about potentially



harmful ideas. The issuance of trigger warnings ahead of engagement with course material suggests some topics are more important than others and implies a normative value on material for which a warning has been issued—often that it is bad (AAUP, 2014; NCAC, 2015). More globally, scholars argue the use of trigger warnings has reinforced negative images of women and crime victims. Specifically, the demand for trigger warnings has emanated largely from female students, and critics suggest these warnings have portrayed an image of women as weak, emotional, and in need of protection (Doll, 2017; Essig, 2014). Regarding crime victims, trigger warnings may inculcate the misconception that victims are not resilient (Boysen, Wells, & Dawson, 2016) or create a larger culture of “victimhood” among students (Robbins, 2016). Finally, one high profile piece speculated that exposure to trigger warnings may lead to thought patterns that increase depression and anxiety (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

Student learning may be negatively impacted if trigger warnings lead to the omission of potentially triggering material from courses. If faculty omit relevant material from courses because it may be triggering or students think some topics are unacceptable to talk about or some opinions are not safe to express, trigger warnings could result in the stifling of learning (NCAC, 2015). A number of critics have argued that trigger warnings may produce a chilling effect and are mechanisms of censorship that restrict the academic freedoms of faculty who see themselves as inhibited in their ability to discuss potentially upsetting material—either because they are afraid of harming students or of running afoul of the administration (Essig, 2014; NCAC, 2015).

### **Trigger Warnings and Their Impact**

In spite of these countering claims regarding the use of trigger warnings, there is scant empirical research on their use and impact. Research seems limited to two peer-reviewed studies with student samples (Bentley, 2017; Beverly et al., 2017) and three published studies of faculty

(including Boysen, Wells & Dawson, 2016), two of which were not subject to peer review (Kamenetz, 2016; NCAC, 2015). Bentley (2017) used survey and focus group data from undergraduates enrolled in two modules related to security and international relations (N=59) to assess student opinions about trigger warnings. Her findings revealed considerable diversity in how students viewed trigger warnings. Students were equally likely to agree or disagree that trigger warnings helped them better prepare for the course material, though 75% of students in one of the modules who identified as having a potentially triggering condition reported that the trigger warnings increased their preparedness. While a majority of students thought trigger warnings were “a good idea,” a minority disagreed and some indicated that trigger warnings increased their concern about upcoming content. This concern was more common among students who did not self-identify as having a potentially triggering condition. Those same students expressed other ideas, such as that, while they did not need the trigger warnings, they would be good for others but also that trigger warnings should not be used because students are adults and should know what to expect in a college-level class. Finally, the majority of students did not think trigger warnings interfered with academic freedom, but some worried that, even if they had not yet done so, trigger warnings may limit academic freedom in the future.

Beverly and colleagues (2017) studied perceptions of trigger warnings among medical students as part of a larger survey on medical education. Sixty-one percent of students responded to an online survey for a final sample size of 259. As in the previous study, there was a diversity of opinions about trigger warnings. When asked if they supported the use of trigger warning in medical school 31% responded yes, 39% maybe, and 30% no. Responses did not differ by gender. Qualitative analysis of an open-ended follow up question regarding the use of trigger warnings in medical education (n=175) revealed three themes: medical students need to learn

how to handle distressing information (n = 47%), with many highlighting that a career as a doctor will not come with trigger warnings; trigger warnings allow students to prepare for what is coming (n = 33%); and trigger warnings help students understand the severity of the material (n = 19%). A small portion of students (n = 4%) raised the concern that the use of trigger warnings might interfere with learning, particularly by introducing bias about the material.

On the faculty side, results from a survey of members of the Modern Language Association (MLA) and College Art Association (CAA) demonstrated high levels of concern about potential negative impact of trigger warnings on classroom dynamics, college teaching, and academic freedom, although a minority responded “don’t know” (NCAC, 2015). Despite these concerns or lack of knowledge, 58% of respondents had used trigger warnings and 12% used them regularly. Fifteen percent of respondents had a student request a trigger warning and 12% had a student complain about the absence of a trigger warning, but in both cases, almost all respondents only reported one or two occurrences. While the MLA and CAA are large organizations (over 38,000 members combined), given the extremely low response rate (2% or less; see Schmidt, 2015), the generalizability of the findings is limited, at best, to their members. National Public Radio also conducted a non-scientific survey of faculty at two- and four-year public and private, non-profit and for-profit colleges and universities (Kamenetz, 2016). Of the 841 responses received, half (n = 51%) of respondents used trigger warnings with most (n = 65%) using them because they thought the material merited it. Details on sampling, response rates, and the sample have not been published, which means the generalizability of the findings remains unknown publically and findings must be cautiously interpreted.

The lone, peer-reviewed faculty study, using 131 undergraduate psychology professors selected from a random sample of four-year colleges, revealed some complexities in examining

trigger warnings (Boysen, Wells, & Dawson, 2016). When respondents were asked about trigger warnings, 31% had used them, 49% had not, and 20% were unfamiliar with the concept. Of those familiar with trigger warnings, 44% had a negative opinion, 25% had a favorable opinion, and 31% were neutral. In terms of their impact on students, 40% of participants thought trigger warnings would have no impact on student mental health, 34% believed they would be beneficial, and 25% believed they would be harmful. The authors concluded that professors of abnormal psychology in general did not see trigger warning use as essential to teaching about sensitive topics (e.g., description of a traumatic experience).

### **Contributions of the Current Study**

Some have issued a call for more research to inform the use of trigger warnings (Laguardia, Michalsen, & Rider-Milkovich, 2016), particularly addressing the need for primary research with students (Boysen, Wells, & Dawson, 2016). To answer that call, we surveyed undergraduate students exposed to trigger warnings in a large victimology course at a mid-sized, public university. Our first three research questions focused on how students view trigger warnings: (1) What are student attitudes toward the general use of trigger warnings?; (2) What are student attitudes toward the use of trigger warnings in their victimology course?; and (3) Did the use of trigger warnings impact student behavior in their victimology course? The fourth research question asked: (4) Are students with victimization histories more supportive of trigger warnings? Collectively, we hope answers to these four questions will inform the debate over the use of trigger warnings in courses offered at institutions of higher education. This study adds the student voice to address claims about if they think trigger warnings have harmed or helped their educational experience and if trigger warnings changed how they approached course material.

### **Method**

## Procedures

Self-report surveys were administered in an undergraduate victimology course at a large, state institution during the 2016 spring semester. The institutional review board approved the research protocol prior to data collection. The study campus is a mid-sized, public university located in the southern United States. The undergraduate student population for the study year was 61% female, 81% full time, 20% living on campus, and 53% white, 20% Hispanic, and 19% African American, with a mean age of 22 years.

Victimology counts as a required course for some majors and an elective course among non-majors. The professor used trigger warnings throughout the course. Students were introduced to trigger warnings the first day of class through a statement read aloud from the syllabus titled, “Trigger Warnings (TW):”

“It is important to keep in mind that victimization is something that affects millions of people nationwide. It is likely that many of the students in this classroom may have had experiences with or know someone who has experienced some form of victimization. As we discuss and explore the etiology of victimization, the definitions, illustrations, and examples of victimization we talk about may illicit discomfort and/or emotional responses. We call these “triggers.” To alleviate concerns surrounding what to expect in terms of content, if there is extraordinarily sensitive material being presented in a particular lecture or film, it has been coded **TW**, for “trigger warning.” Please plan accordingly.”

Periodic verbal warnings were provided to students prior to discussion of particularly sensitive material (e.g., sexual assault, intimate partner violence, child sexual abuse, sex trafficking) and before viewing documentaries in class. For example, the professor provided trigger warnings during the class prior to scheduled documentary screenings on child sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, and sexual assault to remind students that sensitive and disturbing material detailing victimization experiences would be presented. Students were reminded again just before the video screening. Strategies for dealing with emotional upset were discussed and the

option to temporarily leave class was presented. Students were also encouraged to use campus and community resources with contact and access information provided in the syllabus.

Data were collected using a pencil and paper, self-report survey on the last substantive day of class. At the start of class, students were verbally invited by the professor to participate in the survey. The study was described to potential participants as a “2016 Survey of College Student Experiences with Trigger Warnings.” While the survey was administered by the course professor, this practice is not unfamiliar to students at this institution and additional precautions were employed to alleviate any potential concerns surrounding coercion. Students were assured that their participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. No identifying information was collected. Students were provided with extra credit for participation regardless of the extent of survey completion. Introduction to the survey included information that student status and course performance would not be negatively impacted and an alternate extra credit option was made available to those students disinterested in participation. No student opted out or requested an alternate assignment. Students were separated in the classroom by sex to facilitate privacy and comfort in answering survey questions. Each survey was presented, along with a consent document, in an opaque envelope. Completed surveys are returned in opaque envelopes to survey proctors and consent documents are put into a black box situated proximally separate from surveys. Participation included the completion of an 8-page instrument comprised of demographic questions, items about perceptions of trigger warnings, and questions that captured exposure to victimization. Items were presented in set order and completion of the survey took approximately 25 minutes. Participants were provided with campus and community resources in the event of emotional upset or discomfort.

### **Description of Sample**

There were 190 undergraduates enrolled in the course and 162 students completed the surveys, for a response rate of 85%. After deleting cases for missing responses on measures to be used in the quantitative analyses (6.2% of original cases), 152 cases were included, so the final response rate was 80%. The final sample was 57.9% female,<sup>1</sup> 32.9% white non-Hispanic, 20.4% African-American, 35.5% Hispanic, and 11.2% identifying as some other race or ethnicity, with a mean age of 20.5 years (see Table 1). More than half (n = 54%) of participants were sophomores (40% juniors, 6% seniors, less than 1% first-year students).

[Table 1 near here]

## Measures

**Student attitudes toward trigger warnings.** No measures of student attitudes toward trigger warnings were found searching electronic bibliographic databases (e.g., PsychInfo). Hence, the authors developed a set of questions for use in this study. Table 2 presents the 29 items used to develop the scales about student trigger warning attitudes.

Items were designed to assess the research questions outlined above, as well as to address previously discussed claims that have been made about the potential benefits and costs of trigger warnings. For example, to gauge if trigger warnings chill classroom discussion, students were presented with the following: “Giving trigger warnings in this class made me feel like there was course material we should not be talking about.” To capture if trigger warnings are infantilizing and coddling students, we asked “Students who need trigger warnings are too coddled.” Questions such as, “The trigger warnings in this class helped me prepare for course materials we covered that day,” addressed if trigger warnings help students prepare for material ahead of time. The response categories were on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For inclusion in the scales, items where high scores indicated less support of

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<sup>1</sup> One student who identified as genderqueer was excluded from analysis.

trigger warnings were reverse coded. The 29 items were divided into three scales, based on inter-item correlations and the judgement of the authors. Each scale had an acceptable Cronbach's alpha, with none lower than .85.

[Table 2 near here]

Students were also asked the open-ended question, "Please explain what you thought about the trigger warnings for this class." Of the 152 students included in the quantitative sample, 142 (93%) provided a response to the open-ended question.

**Victimization.** The survey included previously-used measures of prior victimization (see Table 2). Witness was a dichotomous variable based on four questions about witnessing both mother- and father- perpetrated physical abuse. Students were asked, "while growing up, did they ever see their mom/stepmom hit their dad/stepdad, their mom/stepmom throw something at their dad/stepdad, their dad/stepdad hit their mom/stepmom, or their dad/stepdad throw something at their mom/stepmom?" Students who endorsed at least one item were considered to have witnessed parental violence and coded yes (1) and those who did not witness mother- and/or father- perpetrated physical abuse were coded no (0). Victim was a dichotomous measure of violent victimization based on if a respondent reported experiencing at least one of the following in their lifetime: physical intimate partner violence (based on seven component items, such as "hit you so hard it left bruises or marks" and "pushed, grabbed or shoved you"), sexual assault and rape (based on the modified version of the Koss Sexual Experiences Scale [Koss et al., 2007] and a single item measure asking if they were ever raped), non-domestic assault, robbery, arson, or homicide. Respondents were coded 0 if they did not experience any type of



violent victimization during their lifetime or 1 if they experienced at least one type of violent victimization during their lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

**Control variables.** Data were gathered on student characteristics to include as control variables in the analyses for research question four (see Table 2). Female was a dichotomous variable (M = 0, F = 1). Racial categories included White Non-Hispanic (reference category), African-American, Hispanic, and other race or ethnicity. Age was a continuous variable with a range from 18 to 31 years. A student's estimate of their family's household income (Income) was used as a crude measure of socioeconomic status and had 11 categories (Under \$15,000 [= 0]; \$15,001 to \$25,000; \$25,001 to \$35,000; \$35,001 to \$45,000; \$45,001 to \$55,000; \$55,001 to \$65,000; \$65,001 to \$75,000; \$75,001 to \$85,000; \$85,001 to \$95,000; \$95,001 to \$100,000; over \$100,000 [= 11]). A student's political self-identification was included, as the debate over the use of trigger warnings has unfolded in a politicized atmosphere, with those demanding trigger warnings often characterized as liberal or neoliberal (Chait, 2016). Political Identification was rated on a seven-point scale from extremely conservative (0) to extremely liberal (7).

### **Analysis Plan**

Student attitudes toward the general use of trigger warnings items and multi-item scales were analyzed by calculating the respective mean and standard deviation. Course specific student attitudes and behaviors items and multi-item scales were examined by calculating the respective mean and standard deviation for the quantitative data and supplemented by a content analysis of the open-ended responses. Whether or not victimization history impacted student attitudes and behaviors was examined in a multivariate regression model. The trigger warnings scales

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<sup>2</sup> Three additional multivariate regression models were estimated for each of the trigger warnings scales using alternate measures of victimization, limiting victimization to (1) a dichotomous measure of sexual assault and rape, (2) a dichotomous measure of intimate partner violence, and (3) a dichotomous measure of any victimization, including property victimization. Results were not substantively different from what is presented in this paper (results available from the first author).

evidenced significant skewness,<sup>3</sup> so the square of each scale was used to estimate the multivariate regression models.

## Results

### Student Attitudes toward the General Use of Trigger Warnings

The mean on the General Attitude scale was 3.27 on a scale of 0 to 5, reflecting that students generally supported the use of trigger warnings at the college level (see Table 2). An examination of the individual component items revealed that to be particularly true for any courses that include victimization material (GA5  $M = 3.52$ ; GA6  $M = 3.57$ ). Students also supported the use of trigger warnings given both in the syllabus and verbally in class (see GA5 and GA6 in Table 2, second column). Students generally rejected the most negative statements about trigger warnings, as reflected where three of the four lowest means of all 29 items were for GA1 ( $M = .93$ ), GA2 ( $M = 1.12$ ), and GA3 ( $M = 1.12$ ), but students also exhibited low support for their universal use (GA4  $M = 1.92$ , GA7  $M = 2.20$ ).

### Student Attitudes toward Trigger Warnings in Their Victimology Course

The mean on the Course-Specific Attitude scale was 3.55 on a scale of 0 to 5, reflecting that students supported the use of trigger warnings in the victimology course they were about to complete (see Table 2). Examination of the means for individual component items revealed that students did not support the contention that the use of trigger warnings fostered views of victims as lacking resilience (CSA1  $M = 1.64$ ; CSA2  $M = 1.77$ ), chilled course discussion (CSA5  $M = 1.70$ ; CSA6  $M = 1.03$ ; CSA7  $M = 1.92$ ), or infantilized students (CSA8  $M = 1.28$ ). Students appreciated the use of trigger warnings given verbally (CSA12  $M = 4.03$ ) and in the syllabus (CSA11  $M = 4.00$ ), to a lesser extent for the documentaries (CSA15  $M = 3.64$ ) and books (CSA

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<sup>3</sup> The statistical significance of the skewness was calculated by dividing the skewness statistic by its standard error to yield a  $z$  score, with  $p < .05$  (Warner, 2013, p. 153).

$M = 3.75$ ), and indicated that trigger warnings helped them understand the negative impact victimization may have on others (CSA3  $M = 3.85$ ).

Qualitative analysis of students' written comments about their thoughts for trigger warnings in their class produced three main themes, which address research question two: (1) Trigger Warnings and Other Students, (2) Frequency, and (3) Proportionality. One quarter ( $n = 27\%$ ) addressed how trigger warnings related to other students and split into two subthemes: (1) Concern for Other Students and (2) Other Students' Sensitivity. In the 29 responses related to Concern for Other Students, the theme was that trigger warnings could be helpful for other students in preparing for coming topics. Comments included concern for others who may have experienced it:

"I felt that they were necessary because there are people in the class who might have some experiences with the topics being discussed."

and

"I assume that it helped people who might have gone through specific types of victimization prepare for what was to come."

As well as for those who might be sensitive to the material for an unspecified reason:

"They were there for people for needed them."

or for students in general:

"They helped everyone prepare for what they were about to see."

The ten responses included in the Other Students' Sensitivity subtheme were a mix. There were those who focused globally on their view of students as too coddled and sensitive:

"Feel like today's students are too emotional and coddled and too many warnings just make them worse."

and others who made the point that Criminal Justice majors should be able to deal with these topics and not need trigger warnings:

“It was too much, we're all CJ majors who are supposed to be tough.”

Noteworthy among these responses is that, in spite of holding what might be viewed as a negative perspective on trigger warnings and their fellow classmates, students still voiced some support for the use of trigger warnings by stating:

“Necessary but made students feel coddled.”

Eighteen percent of responses (25 of 142 responses) explicitly addressed the frequency of trigger warning use in the victimology course. Most students supported the use of trigger warnings, but thought they could be issued less frequently than they were:

“Sometimes I felt like some of the warnings were not needed.”

with some recommending giving a trigger warning just once:

“I just believe it is enough warning if it's just said once.”

Others felt the frequency of trigger warnings usage was just right:

“They were not over used or under used.”

Proportionality addressed that a number of students thought the trigger warnings made the material seem worse than it actually was (10 of 142 responses or 7%), although again, many of these student still voiced support for the use of trigger warnings:

“When I was told the trigger warning, I expected the material to be more graphic and worse than it was. But I was still appreciative about them.”

### **Impact Student Behavior in Their Victimology Course**

The mean on the Course-Specific Behavior subscale was 3.21 on a scale of 0 to 5, indicating that students somewhat agreed that the trigger warnings impacted how they approached the course and its materials. One theme from the content analysis addressed student behavior in response to trigger warnings: Self-Preparation. Over 20% of the student responses

(31 out of 142) referred in some way to self-preparation. The majority (19 responses) posited that the trigger warnings assisted them in preparation for either the content:

“I felt that trigger warnings were necessary for this class due to unpleasant material. The warnings helped to prepare me for the graphic nature of each topic.”

their own reactions:

“I really appreciated the warnings, if we didn't have them I would be caught off guard and probably miss material I needed.”

or lecture and discussion:

“Helped me be prepared for the lecture mentally.”

and

“I thought the trigger warnings prepared me for what I was about to see or hear in the class. Knowing the professor did this made me more comfortable learning the subject material.”

The remainder of the responses clustered around the subtheme that a respondent did not expect the material to impact them, so trigger warnings and self-preparation were not needed:

“I didn't think much of them because none of the topics had any direct impact on me.”

### **Victimization History and Support for Trigger Warnings**

The results from the regression analysis found that students who had experienced violent victimization did not significantly differ in their general attitude, course-specific attitude, and course-specific behavior than those who did not have a history of violent victimization. The Victim and Witness variables were not significant predictors for any of the three trigger warnings scales (see Table 3). Given that past research has found differential effects of victimization by gender for college students (Romito & Grassi, 2007), we also tested the interactions between the gender and victimization variables. Those interactions were not significant for any of the three trigger warnings scales. Female students consistently evidenced stronger support for trigger

warnings than male counterparts; gender was the only significant predictor of all three trigger warnings measures. Race and age were not related to trigger warnings attitudes and behaviors. Students with a higher family income were less likely to report that trigger warnings impacted their behavior in the victimology course, but income was not related to their general or course specific attitudes towards trigger warnings.

[Table 3 near here]

### **Discussion**

Recently, a passionate debate has been waged in the popular press, online, and on college and university campuses around the use of trigger warnings in courses. This debate has not been grounded in either quantitative or qualitative scientific findings. The current study begins to inform this debate and related institutional policy and individual pedagogical decisions by exploring student attitudes toward trigger warnings using quantitative and qualitative data collected from students enrolled in a large victimology course. This represents a first logical step of a larger research initiative to systematically explore student and faculty attitudes toward trigger warnings.

It appears from these findings that, while there was considerable support among students for the use of trigger warnings in this victimology course, perhaps student attitudes about trigger warnings are not as strong or polarized as has been claimed by some critics or reflected in the demands of some students groups for widespread use of trigger warnings (e.g., University of California- Santa Barbara Associated Student Senate). The support for trigger warnings is support in moderation, with the means on all three trigger warnings scales in the range between slight and moderate support. It may be that, as suggested by item variation and some open-ended question comments, students see a need for trigger warnings under particular conditions, such as

certain courses or topics or certain types of content, or want trigger warnings issued, but less frequently. Support for trigger warnings may arise in part from a protective, or what some have seen as a paternalistic impulse, where students push for trigger warnings not for themselves but for others who may need it (Halberstam, 2017). Our findings are consistent with other studies with college student samples that found a diversity of opinions regarding trigger warnings (Bentley, 2017; Beverly et al., 2017).

This study also investigated if those who had experienced violent victimization more strongly endorsed trigger warnings overall and in victimology classes and were more likely to alter their course-related behavior. That does not appear to be the case in our sample, as neither measure of victimization (experiencing violent victimization sometime over their lifetime or witnessing physical intimate partner violence in childhood) significantly predicted trigger warnings attitudes. In supplemental analyses not presented in this paper, we tested if more specific types of victimization experiences were linked to trigger warnings attitudes, including sexual assault and rape, as these have been linked to the trigger warning debate (Hartford, 2016), but findings were not significant. It may be the need for trigger warnings by students who are victims has been overstated. It is possible that findings reported here reflect a statistical artifact, where the sample size lacked the statistical power to detect what could be a small effect. This may also reflect a validity issue as we used a very brief and rudimentary measure of prior victimization that did not include measures of frequency or severity of victimization. Additionally, a measure of recent victimization might be a more accurate predictor of trauma that would impact class engagement as psychological functioning of most victims of crime returns to pre-victimization levels by six months to a year later (Norris & Kaniasty, 1994). Future research should include a measure of child maltreatment given past research has uncovered a persistent

negative impact of child maltreatment into adulthood (Norman, Byambaa, Butchart, Scott & Vos, 2012). Finally, while the term ‘trigger warning’ was used in the course, further research is necessary to understand if substantive differences exist between the various terminology that has been referenced in other writings on the topic (e.g., trigger warnings, content advisories, topic advisories, behavior warnings).

As is often the case, this research answered some questions and opened up others. These findings suggest there may be considerable, but nuanced student support for the use of trigger warnings, and the findings do not support that trigger warnings were seen as universally causing harm to these students or their engagement with the class, including in class discussion. The variability in responses in quantitative and qualitative data revealed, however, that students within this sample held a wide range of views about trigger warnings. While most clustered in the middle, supporting use of trigger warnings under some circumstances, there are some at both ends of the debate continuum who evidenced either blanket condemnation or blanket support for the use of trigger warnings.

In the future, research should use larger samples from multiple colleges and universities of varying types (e.g., size, public/private, secular/religiously-affiliated, residential/commuter) and from courses in addition to victimology and across disciplines (i.e., not limited to Criminal Justice). The use of larger, more diverse samples would allow a more comprehensive exploration of student attitudes toward and experiences with trigger warnings. This sample was too small and lacked diversity in key areas to explore intersectionalities of race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and age – all factors that impact experiences of victimization and interactions with social institutions, such as those of higher education. This field of study also needs development of a standardized and validated measure of student trigger



warning attitudes – the open-ended responses here cannot help to estimate and generalize students' attitudes toward trigger warnings, but can aid in understanding the range of students' attitudes and assist in measure development. Future studies should include focus groups and qualitative analyses to insure that the full range of student responses is captured, which would assist in theory development, as well as experimental and quasi-experimental designs to assess the impact of trigger warning use on student attitudes and behaviors. In particular, to study the impact of trigger warnings on college students' attitudes and behaviors, it would be helpful to have a design that includes a control group (ideally randomly assigned) exposed to the same class material (ideally taught by the same professor), but without trigger warnings. A comparison of attitudes and an objective measure of student participation (e.g., a quantified way to assess class discussion) would provide a stronger test of the utility of trigger warnings or lack thereof. Finally, a full examination of trigger warnings also must include a study of the views of faculty. This work should pay close attention to conceptual issues, using clear definitions of terms like trigger warnings, and exploring if a shift to a term like 'content advisory' (Laguardia, Michalsen, & Rider-Milkovich, 2016) would impact attitudes.

While a preliminary examination of trigger warnings, this study offers one of the first scientific evaluations of student attitudes about their use. Our hope is that continuing conversations can be grounded in quantitative and qualitative research from both students and faculty to more fully inform the debate about the use, purpose, and impact of trigger warnings.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

<b>Variable Name</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Variable Name</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Witness	33.6	51	Age	20.5	2.6
Victim	66.4	101	Income	5.4	3.52
Female	57.9	88	Political Identification	3.8	1.3
Race/Ethnicity					
White, Non-Hispanic	32.9	50			
African American	20.4	31			
Hispanic	35.5	54			
Other	11.2	17			



Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation for Trigger Warnings Scales and Items and Cronbach’s Alpha for Scales

Scale	Item Number: Statement <sup>1</sup>	Mean <sup>2</sup>	SD <sup>3</sup>	Cronbach’s Alpha
General Attitude		3.27	1.14	.88
	GA1: Trigger warnings are unnecessary <sup>4</sup>	.93	1.47	
	GA2: Student who need trigger warnings should not be taking classes that talk about sensitive or offensive material <sup>4</sup>	1.12	1.48	
	GA3: Student who need trigger warnings are too coddled <sup>4</sup>	1.12	1.51	
	GA4: All classes should give trigger warnings on the syllabus, regardless of topic	1.92	1.63	
	GA5: Other classes that cover victimization material should have trigger warnings in the syllabus	3.52	1.41	
	GA6: Other classes that cover victimization material should have trigger warnings given verbally in class	3.57	1.40	
	GA7: This university should require professors to put a trigger warning on the syllabus	2.20	1.62	
Course-Specific Attitude		3.55	.80	.88
	CSA1: The trigger warnings in this class made me feel like victims cannot handle hearing about victimization <sup>4</sup>	1.64	1.47	
	CSA2: The trigger warnings in this class made me feel like victims cannot handle talking about victimization <sup>4</sup>	1.77	1.46	
	CSA3: The trigger warnings in this class made me realize how many people are negatively affected by victimization	3.85	1.18	
	CSA4: The trigger warnings in this class made me aware of how course material may affect other students in the class	3.99	1.10	
	CSA5: The trigger warnings in this class made me feel like there were some topics that were not okay to talk about in class <sup>4</sup>	1.70	1.51	

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CSA6: Giving trigger warnings in this class made me feel like there was course material that we should not be talking about <sup>4</sup>	1.03	1.17	
CSA7: The trigger warnings in this class made me feel like the professor was censoring class material <sup>4</sup>	1.92	1.44	
CSA8: When the professor gave trigger warnings it made me feel like we were treated as children <sup>4</sup>	1.28	1.57	
CSA9: The trigger warnings in this class helped me feel more prepared to deal with course material	3.80	1.33	
CSA10: The trigger warnings in this class helped me feel more comfortable with course material	3.45	1.34	
CSA11: I appreciate that the professor included trigger warnings on the syllabus	4.00	1.36	
CSA12: I appreciate that the professor provided verbal trigger warnings in class	4.03	1.30	
CSA13: The trigger warnings in this class were provided too often	2.14	1.59	
CSA14: The trigger warnings in this class were too repetitive	1.93	1.41	
CSA15: Trigger warnings were appropriate before each documentary	3.64	1.31	
CSA16: Trigger warnings were appropriate for the books in this class	3.75	1.29	
<b>Course-Specific Behavior</b>	<b>3.21</b>	<b>1.14</b>	<b>.85</b>
CSB1: The trigger warnings in this class helped me to think about how to express my ideas in a way that would not harm others	3.61	1.20	
CSB2: The trigger warnings in this class helped me avoid being triggered by class material	2.74	1.60	
CSB3: Trigger warnings helped me to prepare for course materials we covered for that day	3.37	1.42	
CSB4: I changed how I approached the course material because of the trigger warnings in this class	2.82	1.62	
CSB5: Trigger warnings given verbally before each documentary helped me prepare for			

what we were about to see	3.59	1.40
CSB6: Trigger warnings given verbally for each book we read helped me prepare for what I was about to read.	3.44	1.47

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<sup>1</sup> Number of cases range from 148 to 152 for individual items.

<sup>2</sup> Responses are on a scale of 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

<sup>3</sup> SD = Standard Deviation

<sup>4</sup> Reverse coded when included in scales but scores from original coding of 0(Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) are presented here.

Table 3: Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for Trigger Warnings Scales (Squared)

Constant and Variables	General Attitude <i>b (se)</i>	Course-Specific Attitude <i>b (se)</i>	Course-Specific Behavior <i>b (se)</i>
Constant	1.08 (4.75)	8.55 (3.85)*	5.81 (4.33)
Witness	1.28 (1.16)	1.04 (.94)	-.58 (1.06)
Victim	.46 (1.40)	.21 (.94)	-.06 (1.05)
Female	3.43 (1.08)**	2.70 (.88)**	4.87 (.99)***
African American	.74 (1.49)	.03 (1.21)	.73 (1.36)
Hispanic	-.61 (1.31)	.41 (1.06)	1.67 (1.19)
Other Race or Ethnicity	-.65 (2.05)	.38 (1.66)	-.59 (1.87)
Age	.29 (.20)	.07 (.17)	.18 (.19)
Income	-.10 (.17)	-.14 (.13)	-.34 (.15)*
Political Identification	.80 (.43) <sup>†</sup>	.52 (.35)	.23 (.39)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.11	.10	.23
N		152	

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$