

Trigger warning: More empirical evidence for the priming effects of trigger warnings ahead

Lucas Griffin

Appalachian State University

*A special thanks to Chris Dickinson, Ph.D, Joshua Broman-Fulks, Ph.D., Christian Hall, Elijah Richardson, Esther Killius, and Mackenzie Kirsch*

**Abstract**

The use of trigger warnings and microaggressions within a university setting has recently become the center of controversy. The current study sought to examine the degree to which trigger warnings influenced participants' perceptions towards potentially distressing and/or socially discriminatory literary passages. 128 participants, recruited from Amazon mTurk, completed a survey in which they read 3 pre-manipulation passages, 7 passages during the manipulation (half of the participants received trigger warnings before each of these passages and the other half did not), and 3 post-manipulation passages. Results showed that participants who received trigger warnings evaluated the post-manipulation microaggressive passage and microaggressive email as less discriminatory, but evaluated the post-manipulation mildly distressing passage as more discriminatory. Potential explanation and implications surrounding these findings is offered in the discussion section.

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In recent years throughout the United States, college campuses are experiencing a student lead movement that has caused significant debate, anxiety, and political polarization amongst academic researchers, university faculty and administrators, and students. Characterized by a push towards political correctness (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), which emphasizes the restriction of hateful speech, the restructuring of the university culture and environment to be more inclusive for historically marginalized identities and groups through the eradication of symbols and monuments that are linked to systems of oppression (e.g., the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and the forced removal of the Silent Sam statue), and the social and educational benefits invoked through diversity, there is great division within academia as to what this movement truly entails (Bacon, 2019; Hickey, 2016). While creating and fostering a safe and welcoming space for which students can learn and develop their own identity is a central goal for any university, some researchers, professors, and students worry that the current college climate reflects a degree of vindictive protectiveness, punishing and potentially ostracizing any individual that is perceived to have offended and upset members of the student body (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

Amongst those who are critical of this recent wave of political correctness, there is an underlying concern that emotional reasoning (e.g., “I feel offended, so an offense must have occurred”) has superseded objective and logical reasoning (Ferranti, Scott, & McDermott, 2018), and this transition, occurring within and promoted by colleges across the US (Byron, 2017; Feliciano & Green, 2018; Flaherty, 2014; Schroeder, 2017) is undermining another goal of the university curriculum, which is to challenge students’ presuppositions and existing beliefs

through the presentation of incongruent, and potentially controversial, material and information (Batchelor, Burch, Gibson, & Kimball, 2018; Wolfsdorf, 2018). For many such critics, there is popular notion that this movement, which is based on protecting students from experiencing psychological and emotional harm or distress, is creating a culture of anti-intellectualism, intellectual homogeneity, and a constant state of outrage that manifests when speech is seen as a method of violence that possesses the capability to perpetuate systemic inequities and marginalization (Ferranti, Scott, & McDermott, 2018; Hickey, 2016; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

There are two critical components within this movement of political correctness that are worthy of study and discussion: trigger warnings and racial microaggressions. While both concepts have been used and examined for decades, there has been a recent surge in controversy surrounding the existence, utility, and implementation of each, specifically within a university setting. Trigger warnings are presented before potentially distressing content as a means to prevent those who have experienced trauma from unexpectedly enduring a negative physiological and affective response that manifests from a particular trigger (Halberstam, 2017; Hickey, 2016). Originally, trigger warnings were created solely for the purpose to protect soldiers suffering from PTSD from re-experiencing traumatic memories once they returned home from the Vietnam War (Wolfsdorf, 2018). However, our conception of trauma, and what constitutes as having suffered from trauma and PTSD-like symptoms, has radically changed since the 1960s (McNally, 2016).

Racial microaggressions, for example, underscore such a transformation. Originally described by Pierce in 1970 to describe the detrimental, racist offenses that black people regularly experience (Tao, Owen, & Drinane, 2018), racial microaggressions, according to Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin (2007), “are brief and commonplace

daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (p. 271), and these subtle and covert expressions have been shown to have profound psychological consequences. An example of a microaggression, provided by the authors, would be, “I believe the most qualified person should get the job,” which, on deeper analysis, conveys the message that “people of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race” (276). For victims of racial microaggressions, there is often initial confusion and tension trying to identify whether or not a microaggression had occurred, and the difficulty underlying their judgment is exacerbated since the perpetrator is usually unaware of, or refuses to acknowledge, the implicit racial biases they are displaying (Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007).

White people in the US tend to believe themselves as altruistic, egalitarian, and anti-racist (Alcoff, 2015; Picower, 2009; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007; Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2014), so when confronted with the possibility that they themselves had committed a racial microaggression, perpetrators often blame the victim for being overly sensitive and overreacting (Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Racial microaggressions have been documented as a continuously experienced phenomenon throughout the lives of people of color, and the cumulative effects can cause stress, depression, anxiety, frustration, racial divide and tension, and lowered self-esteem (Pearce, 2019; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007; Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2014).

In therapeutic settings, for example, racial microaggressions that manifest during interactions between white clinicians and patients of color have been theorized to be potentially

responsible for the higher rates of early termination of services amongst minority populations, as well as a significant factor as to why mental health services aren't as often pursued when compared to whites. In fact, some clients of color may even feel worse after receiving therapeutic services than they had before beginning the session (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). Evoking such consequences, racial microaggressions have sometimes been conceptualized as a form of trauma, and due to their subtle nature and ever-constant presence, people of color may find greater difficulty in confronting and responding to such acts than overt depictions of racism that are more obvious and clearly defined (Pearce, 2019; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Equilin, 2007).

Both trigger warnings and racial microaggressions have extended into the university culture with the aim of respecting and acknowledging the diversity throughout the student body (Byron, 2017; Godderis & Root, 2016; Halberstam, 2017; Pearce, 2019; Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2015). Implementing trigger warnings within the classroom provides those who have suffered from trauma with the knowledge and ability to prepare for upcoming discussions and material that may cause significant distress (Bentley, 2017). From victims of sexual violence, racism, misogyny, assault, and/or war, trigger warnings are intended to provide an inclusive, safe space for such students (Lockhart, 2016). The study and discussion of racial microaggressions within the classroom envisions a similar goal, hoping to bring attention to the subtle, implicit ways in which racism manifests, which in turn, will operate to dismantle institutional and social barriers that prevent the autonomy, agency, and self-actualization of people of color (Pearce, 2019; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Equilin, 2007; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). However, while these

goals seem compassionate and equitable, there is a great divide between academics regarding both trigger warnings and racial microaggressions.

### **The trigger warning debate**

Trigger warnings have been widely promoted by students and faculty within universities across the US. For example, in 2014, at the University of California in Santa Barbara, students passed a resolution that urged professors to include trigger warnings on their syllabi as a means to forewarn of distressing material that may be harmful and upsetting to those suffering from trauma (Byron, 2017). At Oberlin College in 2012, administrators endorsed a trigger warning policy that urged professors to avoid discussing triggering material that wasn't necessary for the class curriculum, but to also include trigger warnings before presenting students with material that may cause one to recall a traumatic event (Flaherty, 2014). Trigger warnings are becoming such a normalized method to alleviate psychological distress amongst those suffering from trauma, that even several theatre companies, including Philadelphia's Interact Theatre Company, Baltimore Center Stage, and The Denver Center Theater Company, are beginning to present trigger warnings to their patrons to forewarn of the potentially traumatic scenes that will be shown in their plays (Paulson, 2018).

Proponents of trigger warnings believe that, within the classroom setting, trigger warnings grant students suffering from trauma agency over their own trauma. If such students are informed of the material that will be presented in the class prior to particular assignments or classroom discussions, then these individuals can decide, on their own accord, whether they wish to attend and engage with potentially distressing and controversial content (Byron, 2017; Godderis & Root, 2016). To that extent, trigger warnings prepare students to interact with such

material, fostering intellectual growth and discussion since students are cognizant of the information they will be reviewing (Lockhart, 2016).

If students are unexpectedly presented with distressing content, for example, a story that includes a graphic depiction of a rape, then there is a potential, some argue, that some individuals, specifically those who have a personal connection to the material, may experience a non-voluntary emotional and psychological response that could lead to a state in which they can't process, or refuse to process, the information (Halberstam, 2017; Hickey, 2016). Therefore, trigger warnings mitigate such a reaction by allowing students time to prepare for the material. Not only that, but some believe that trigger warnings actually limit the extent to which students are made upset and distressed by shocking content, and such warnings actually foster students' engagement with the text (Bentley, 2017), for, already aware of the content that constitutes the controversy (e.g., depictions of rape), students can more deeply analyze the meaning, symbolism, and ethical components of the text (Lockhart, 2016).

Proponents also believe that trigger warnings operate to foster an inclusive and diverse learning environment since their inclusion within the classroom curriculum acknowledges the different realities and experiences among members of the student body (Byron, 2017). Through this view, trigger warnings underscore a method of informed consent, providing students suffering from trauma the knowledge to make an informed, autonomous decision regarding whether they would like to interact with their triggers or not (Bentley, 2017). Trigger warnings, therefore, serve to reconstruct the classroom dyadic between the professor and the student by emphasizing a setting of respect, consent, and reciprocal learning, rather than have the professor dictate which material the students should engage with, a practice that undermines the individual differences and diverse backgrounds students bring to the classroom (Godderis & Root, 2016).

Thus, students suffering from trauma are permitted a space that conforms to their needs, interests, and experiences, which, in turn, fosters a proactive learning environment that is built upon inclusivity and student autonomy (Hickey, 2016; Lockhart, 2016).

In sum, for those who support the use of trigger warnings and view such as a necessary form of respect that acknowledges the diverse backgrounds of members of the student body, classroom material holds the potential to elicit a strong, negative affective and psychological response that is damaging to those suffering from trauma. As Angela Shaw-Thornburg (2014) of South Carolina State University notes, “a word or an image is as capable of triggering hurt or delivering violence as a fired gun,” and this reality must be understood and accommodated for within the university culture and curriculum. Those who are critical of trigger warnings, though, are weary that such warnings may provoke more harm than good.

Some believe that trigger warnings undermine the principles of prolonged exposure therapy, promoting avoidance rather than direct engagement with one’s triggers and trauma (Bellet, Jones, & McNally, 2018; Ferranti, Scott, McDermott, 2018). Exposure works to mitigate catastrophic thinking, fortune telling (believing that something horrible will occur and perceiving your prediction as factual), and the degree of distress provoked when one experiences a trigger, which allows for those suffering from trauma better capability to handle and control their psychological and affective states (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Prolonged exposure therapy has been well documented as an efficient clinical treatment for those suffering from PTSD, depression, anxiety, and particular phobias (Brown, Jerud, Asnaani, Petersen, Zang, & Foa, 2018; Morkved, Hartmann, Aarsheim, Holen, Milde, Bomyea, & Thorp, 2014; Powers, Halpern, Ferenschak, Gillihan, & Foa, 2010; Ready, Lamp, Rauch, Astin, Norrholm, 2018), and some critics of trigger warnings believe the classroom to be an optimal setting for which students

suffering from trauma can be exposed to their triggers and experience the benefits that are elicited through prolonged exposure therapy (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

Some critics also believe that trigger warnings, and support for their inclusion in the classroom setting and curriculum, sets dangerous precedence for academic censorship and intellectual homogeneity, for, if trigger warnings are to be presented before controversial material that may make students uncomfortable, professors may avoid teaching and presenting these types of content altogether (Bentley, 2017; Godderis & Root, 2016; Hickey, 2016; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Wolfsdorf, 2018). Burch, Bachelor, Burch, Gibson, & Kimball (2018) posit that students' demands for trigger warnings may be the product of entitlement coupled with narcissism, in that these individuals feel as though the classroom setting and professor should accommodate and conform to their needs and interests, including which kinds of material can be discussed and the ways in which such content can be presented.

These self-perceptions underscore the transformation that has encapsulated students' views towards the goals and methods of the college experience over the past two decades, in that, rather than challenge their existing beliefs and ideologies, education is seen solely as a means to achieve a job, and therefore, should be easy and comfortable (Burch, Bachelor, Burch, Gibson, & Kimball, 2018). This mentality results in intellectual homogeneity through ostracizing material that makes students feel distressed, and professors across the US are apprehensive towards presenting content and ideas that could be labeled as offensive, insensitive, or worse, as a means of perpetuating systemic inequalities and oppression (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Manhattan Institute, 2017; Picower, 2009).

The views amongst students, faculty, and professors across universities reflects the same complex divide amongst academic researchers and writers, in that some believe trigger warnings

to be an undisruptive, necessary method of protection when discussing potentially distressing topics, while others believe that trigger warnings stifle academic freedom. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), for example, condemns the use of trigger warnings because they inhibit critical thinking within the classroom, reflecting a form of censorship that prevents teachers from presenting ideas and material they believe to be pertinent to their curriculum (Godderis & Root, 2016). In 2016, John Ellison, the Dean of Students from the University of Chicago, informed incoming freshmen that the university does not condone the use of trigger warnings because they undermine the school's "commitment to academic freedom" and "the free exchange of ideas" (quoted in Schaper, 2016).

In one study conducted by Burch, et al. (2018), out of 188 students from two different public universities in North Carolina and Florida, only 20.7% of participants endorsed the use of trigger warnings, while 81.4% believed that trigger warnings restricted academic freedom and inhibited open classroom discussion. Along with this, 62.2% of participants felt that the use of trigger warnings promoted a constant state of outrage, and 68% believed that colleges were susceptible to intellectual homogeneity due to recent institutional changes that fostered safe spaces and trigger warnings within the university culture.

In a study conducted by Boysen, Prieto, Holmes, Landrum, Miller, Taylor, White, and Kaiser (2018), though, out of 751 undergraduate psychology students, 59% reported somewhat favorable attitudes. Sixty-one percent of participants reported that their professors introduced trigger warnings as sensitive topics arose in class, and a majority felt that these warnings were a non-disruptive method to better facilitate the presentation and discussion of distressing content. In sum, a majority of these students believed conversations around sensitive issues were

pertinent to their education, and that trigger warnings should be utilized to mitigate potential negative emotional reactions that could manifest from discussions of such controversial material.

In a study conducted by Boysen and Prieto (2018), out of 284 psychology teachers, 47% reported not using trigger warnings while 39% reported using them, with a slight majority of these proponents presenting such warnings as sensitive issues arose during classroom discussion. Overall, professors who endorsed the use of trigger warnings evaluated PTSD-related topics, such as content referring to sexual assault, child abuse, and violence, as more deserving of trigger warnings than non-PTSD-related topics. On average, though, most professors thought that trigger warnings were not at all, or only slightly, necessary, but a few participants perceived trigger warnings as being extremely necessary when discussing the above PTSD-related topics.

### **The racial microaggression debate**

While racial microaggressions are documented phenomena with profound repercussions for the victims of such forms of discrimination and dehumanization (Boysen, 2012; Lui & Quezada, 2019; Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2014), some criticize the manner by which microaggressions are identified (Harris Jr., 2008; Ferranti, Scott, & McDermott, 2018; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Schacht, 2008). As Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin (2007) note:

“The most accurate assessment about whether racist acts have occurred in a particular situation is most likely to be made by those most disempowered rather than by those who enjoy the privileges of power” (278).

Holding this view, though, undermines the intent of a speaker (Ferranti, Scott, & McDermott, 2018), and while one may not have meant to commit an act of racism, a racial microaggression exists as a consequence of emotional reasoning (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). In other words, identifying a microaggression underscores the “he said, she said” debacle, with the lens of objectivity weighing on the side of those who are socially and politically marginalized. Sue, et al. (2007) notes that those belonging to a marginalized identity perceive microaggressions through “experiential reality” (279), utilizing past experiences that are contingent upon particular contexts and focusing on the similarities (e.g., their skin color) that connect each situation together in order to judge whether the current scenario reflects similar modes of prejudice and/or discrimination.

Through this view, then, a person of color who has a significant history of being victimized by racially microaggressive interactions is more prone to identify racial microaggressions as they manifest, for their perceptions are structured from their past experiences (Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008). For example, if a Black American, throughout years of his or her life, is constantly ignored and passed by drivers when trying to hail a taxicab, they are more likely to assume, from their persistent experiences, that the act reflects racial discrimination.

Unfortunately, though, there are no valid and reliable scales to measure and identify racial microaggressions; the scales currently used are of self-report and may in fact be measuring other constructs instead (Ferranti, Scott, & McDermott, 2018). Therefore, according to some critics, racial microaggressions exist as real phenomena because of the subjective perspectives and judgments of a particular individual or group (Ferranti, Scott, & McDermott, 2018; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), which not only assumes that those belonging to a marginalized

identity are “oracles who dispense eternal wisdom” (Eady, 2014, p. 6), possessing the knowledge and capability to correctly identify acts of racism as they occur, but also posits the notion that questioning such judgments invalidates the subjective realities of people of color, thus perpetuating institutional, social, and political inequities (Eady, 2014; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

The difficulty in identifying whether a racial microaggression has manifested during an interaction is due to their ambiguous and subtle nature (Tao, Owen, & Drinane, 2017). While this may reflect an implicit racial bias that results from processes of socialization that structure the ways in which white individuals view themselves, their racial identity, and people of color, perceptions that cause whites to subconsciously marginalize and undermine the identity of non-white others through the use of particular language and non-verbal behaviors (Picower, 2009; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007), some are hesitant to give people of color the benefit of the doubt simply because of their subjective evaluations and judgments, especially when the potential risks for enacting a microaggression could be extremely costly for the perpetrator, such as losing one’s job, receiving varying degrees of hateful criticism, and/or being ostracized from one’s community (e.g., Erika and Nicholas Christakis at Yale University) (Christakis, 2016; Feliciano & Green, 2018; Ferranti, Scott, & McDermott, 2018; Harris Jr., 2008; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

Among some proponents of the push towards studying, identifying, and condemning racial microaggressions as they manifest, there is support towards the idea that, within the classroom, unaddressed microaggressions inhibit diversity of thought, sensations of inclusivity and comfort, and provoke racial tensions when discussions of racism arise (Pearce, 2019; Sue,

Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). In a qualitative study conducted by Sue et al. (2009), students of color reported experiencing powerful, negative emotional reactions provoked through their direct experiences with racial microaggressions, noting difficulty learning in an “invalidating classroom climate” (p. 187). These students often felt they had to exhibit a particular demeanor in order to be taken seriously, and when addressing issues of racism, they felt as though they had to isolate any emotion from their speech and body language, else the validity and pertinence of their opinion would be undermined. Importantly, though, was that all participants agreed with and supported one another when describing their experiences with racial microaggressions in the classroom, underscoring the pervasive and extensive nature of such demeaning interactions.

The most frequent racial microaggressions described amongst participants were those that invalidated and denied the subjective experiences of their racial identities, and among black participants, those that assumed a level of criminality and dangerousness. These students of color also noted the reactions of their white classmates during discussions of race and racism, particularly non-verbal behavior that signified a degree of discomfort. Participants, though, identified effective strategies their professors utilized to successfully facilitate discussions surrounding such sensitive topics, including validating and acknowledging their diverse experiences, feelings, and opinions, as well as using a direct approach rather than allowing students to shape and control the conversation (Sue et al., 2009).

Similarly, Pearce (2019) described the tendency for racial microaggressions to lead to perceptions of a hostile university climate through the perpetuation of “racial battle fatigue” (Smith, 2004, quoted), which manifests when people of color grow exhausted, frustrated, and alienated (from their institution and from white colleagues within the institution) due to their

cumulative experiences with racism and marginalization. Having conducted a six-year longitudinal study, Pearce identified racial microaggressions as endemic amongst the experiences of student teachers of color, but these participants were not equipped with the necessary tools and understanding to identify and challenge such subtle acts of racism as being forms of microaggressions. Commonly, too, was that most white student teachers were ignorant towards the existence and detrimental repercussions of racial microaggressions, believing racism to be a consequence of an individual's false set of beliefs, rather than a product of structural and institutional inequality that solidifies racialized group dynamics, awarding privilege and power among white student teachers (e.g., being seen as an authoritative figure whose opinion and teaching is automatically validated) at the expense of non-white student teachers (e.g., having to behave and appear in a certain manner in order to be taken seriously).

Pearce notes two difficulties that arise when discussions of race occur within the classroom. First, the discussions are often contingent upon the perceptions and affective states of white students, meaning sensitive conversations can't progress to proactive measures else white students feel offended, upset, or undermined, and second, students of color are often at a crossroads: they either make themselves vulnerable by relaying their actual experiences and opinions regarding racism and the methods through which such prejudice and discrimination manifests, or they repress their diverse identity and background to protect the psyches of their white classmates.

To mitigate these difficulties, and the susceptibility for racial tensions to arise within and outside of the classroom, Pearce endorses the teaching and discussion of racial microaggressions, particularly through the perceptions of student teachers of color, as a means to bring awareness to the subtle, insidious methods through which racism exists. Providing student teachers of color

opportunities to discuss their experiences with racial microaggressions, students and professors alike are better cued in to the cumulative nature of such acts, as well to the detrimental repercussions provoked among those victimized within an institution that claims to be deracialized. Importantly, the classroom can serve as a safe space through which white students and students of color can garner more appropriate methods to identify and respond to racial microaggressions as they arise, which serves to create a more inclusive environment that fosters understanding and empathy rather than tension and apprehension.

### **The current study**

The current study aims to examine a potential repercussion of trigger warnings, in that such warnings may operate to cause or exacerbate a distress response when preceding certain material. Few studies have attempted to test whether or not trigger warnings prime individuals to analyze potentially controversial texts through a specific lens that underscores and pronounces the distressing elements of a particular literary work. In one study conducted by Bellet, Jones, and McNally (2018), participants were presented various literary passages that differed in the degree of distressing content: six passages were mildly distressing, five passages were neutral, and five passages were markedly distressing. Half of the participants, though, were presented a trigger warning before reading the markedly distressing passages, which informed these individuals that the following material contained disturbing content and could potentially cause one to experience anxiety, especially among those who suffered from trauma. After reading each passage, participants rated the extent to which the material made them feel anxious, and to determine the severity of participants' emotional reaction evoked through the trigger warning, the researchers compared participants' ratings of the markedly distressing passages to their

baseline ratings (the mildly distressing passages they read before enduring the trigger warning manipulation), as well as compared participants' ratings of the post-manipulation passages (three other mildly distressing passages) to their baseline ratings.

After reading all 16 passages, participants also responded to the Perceived Posttraumatic Vulnerability Scale for Others (PPVS-O), which measures the extent to which an individual believes trauma survivors are prone to long-term negative emotional experiences and affective states, the Perceived Posttraumatic Vulnerability Scale for Self (PPVS-S), which is similar to the PPVS-O except participants imagine themselves as the victim of a traumatic event, and the Words-Can-Harm Scale (WCHS), which measures the extent to which participants believe that certain words can traumatize either themselves or other individuals. The results showed that participants who received trigger warnings prior to reading the markedly distressing passages scored higher on the PPVS-S and PPVS-O when compared to participants who did not receive any trigger warnings, meaning these individuals believed that themselves and others would suffer longer and more negatively if they experienced a traumatic event. No differences were found between the two groups when the researchers compared the anxiety ratings after participants read the markedly distressing passages, but when examining the WCHS as a moderating variable, trigger warnings caused a significant increase in anxiety among those that strongly believed words could potentially traumatize individuals (Bellet, Jones, & McNally, 2018).

The current study attempts to replicate the methodology from the study conducted by Bellet, Jones, and McNally (2018), but also aims to examine whether the use of trigger warnings could cause individuals to identify socially discriminatory content, even when no such elements may necessarily exist in a particular text. Specifically analyzing microaggressions, the current

researchers sought to test whether the use of trigger warnings induced hypersensitivity to offensive language and themes of stereotyping and social inequity in literary passages that don't contain overt examples of social discrimination. If trigger warnings cause recipients to anticipate a negative affective response (Gainsburg & Earl, 2018), then it seems plausible that forewarning an individual of the potential for a negative emotional reaction may cause that person to interpret the material in a manner that confirms the utility of the initial caution. When participants receive trigger warnings prior to the microaggressive and racist passages, examples of discrimination may be more pronounced, and this priming, in turn, may cause participants to evaluate the post-manipulation microaggressive passage and email as more offensive, stereotyping, and socially inequitable.

In a study conducted by Tao, Owen, and Drinane (2017), participants were divided into four subgroups, and each subgroup was shown a scenario between a white, male professor and a black, female student. The scenarios, though, varied among the extent to which the interaction between the two characters reflected a racial microaggression. One group was presented a neutral scenario, one group was presented a very ambiguously microaggressive scenario, one group was presented an ambiguously microaggressive scenario, and one group was presented an overtly microaggressive scenario, in which the professor tells the student that she seems very “punctual and well put together” compared to other black students who seem to “do just enough to get by” (265). The results showed no differences in participants' evaluations towards the neutral, very ambiguous microaggression, and ambiguous microaggression scenarios, except those in the ambiguously microaggressive condition perceived the professor as more culturally biased than those in the neutral condition (Tao, Owen, & Drinane, 2017).

Extending these results, perhaps the presence of a trigger warning, which forewarns of potentially distressing and offensive content, may cue participants in to elements of a literary work that would have gone unnoticed had they not been primed. As in the study conducted by Tao, et al. (2017), participants were unable to identify significant differences between the neutral, very ambiguously microaggressive, and ambiguously microaggressive conditions, but if such participants were cautioned that the scenario may have included distressing and offensive content, then maybe the variance between the microaggressive statements would have been more pronounced, thus more significantly influencing participants' reactions and evaluations towards the professor-student interaction.

The current study attempted to examine the degree to which trigger warnings primed individuals to interpret proceeding literary material through a lens that justifies the use of the initial warning. Specifically, the current researchers analyzed responses towards the post-manipulation literary passages to gauge the effects of such priming on participants' perceptions towards the level of distress and social discrimination invoked through these texts. Participants, recruited from Amazon mTurk, completed a survey in which they read multiple literary passages that varied in the degree of discriminatory and distressing content. As a baseline, pre-manipulation measure, participants read three passages (which included one of two emails) before enduring the trigger warning manipulation, in which half of the participants received trigger warnings before every passage while the other half did not receive any trigger warnings. After the manipulation, all participants read three more passages (which included the other email) without any trigger warnings (as a post-manipulation measure). Lastly, participants indicated whether or not they believed trigger warnings should be presented before potentially distressing material. To that extent, the current researchers hypothesized that:

*Hypothesis 1:* If participants are presented trigger warnings, they will evaluate the post-manipulation mildly distressing passage, email, and microaggressive passage as more distressing than participants that don't receive trigger warnings. These participants will also evaluate the latter two as more socially inequitable, stereotyping, and offensive than participants that don't receive trigger warnings.

*Hypothesis 2:* Participants that receive trigger warnings will be more likely to indicate that trigger warnings should be presented before potentially distressing material compared to participants that don't receive trigger warnings.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

473 participants were recruited on Amazon's mTurk and were provided with a direct link to the survey on Qualtrics. Participants were native English speakers, 18 years of age or older, and current residents of the US. Because microaggressions are context-specific, the researchers did not recruit participants from countries other than the US. Participants were awarded \$.25 for their completion of the survey. Only participants that successfully passed the attention check were included in the data analysis. Of the 473 participants that completed the survey, 128 participants successfully passed the attention check. Of these 128, 61 received trigger warnings and 67 did not receive any trigger warnings. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 87 years old ( $M=40$ ,  $SD=14.12$ ). Of the 128 participants, 39.1% identified as male, 59.4% identified as female, and only one participant preferred not to specify their gender identity. One participant did not provide their self-reported race and ethnicity, so of the 127 participants, 70.1% identified

as non-Hispanic white, 7.9% identified as non-Hispanic black, 9.4% identified as Asian/Asian American, 6.3% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 3.1% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.4% identified as biracial/multiracial, and only one participant preferred not to specify their racial and ethnic identity. Of the 128 participants, 20.3% identified as Catholic, 21.9% identified as Protestant, 12.5% identified as Christian, 12.5% identified as agnostic, 10.2% identified as atheist, 6.3% preferred not to specify their religious identity, 5.5% identified as Hindu, 4.7% provided a religious identity that was not presented on the list provided by the researchers, 1.6% identified as Muslim, .8% identified as Jewish, and .8% identified as Buddhist. The political orientation of participants ranged from extremely conservative (1) to extremely liberal (100) ( $M=57.20$ ,  $SD=28.02$ ).

### **Literary passages**

The current study contained a total of 27 literary passages and 2 emails (one written by Erika Christakis and one written by Bret Weinstein). 16 of the 27 passages were adopted from the study conducted by Bellet et al. (2018) and were categorized by degree of distressing content. Of these 16 passages, 6 were mildly distressing, 5 were neutral, and 5 were markedly distressing. Bellet et al. chose these passages because they were from texts that are common to high school and college world literature course, and an initial pilot study ensured that these passages were consistent with their ascribed category (i.e., mildly distressing, neutral, or markedly distressing).

11 passages were contingent upon elements of one's social identity (mainly the speaker's) and contained descriptions of pronounced or subtle discrimination. Of these 11 passages, 4 were markedly racist. After an initial pilot study, which evaluated participants' reactions towards 15 various passages, these 4 passages were chosen because they scored the

highest on measures that indicated the degree of marginalizing language, social inequity, stereotyping, and offensive language promoted by the text, as well as on measures that indicated the degree of anxiety and overall negative emotional reaction elicited from reading the text. These 4 passages, much like the passages chosen by Bellet et al., are common to high school and college literature courses and/or have been adapted into popular films.

The remaining 7 passages contained examples of microaggressions: 4 of these passages contained examples of racial microaggressions and 3 contained examples of gender microaggressions. All 7 passages were selected because of their ambiguous nature, but some aspects of each passage were removed or reworded to mitigate potential confounds. A crucial component of this study is to examine the degree to which trigger warnings influence participants' reactions towards content that may or may not contain distressing and/or offensive elements. However, if participants are made aware of the significance of social identity within a particular passage (such as repeatedly describing a character's phenotype), then the reactions provoked from the trigger warning may be superseded by the reactions provoked from such content.

While these passages are contingent upon elements of one's social identity, as microaggressions are, repeated exposure to these aspects may cue participants in to the significance that race and/or gender holds in the text. Therefore, the ambiguity of the post-manipulation microaggressive passage may be undermined if participants are cognizant of the, for example, racialized dynamic explored through the text, such that one may be more prone to identify elements of discrimination not because of the priming elicited from the use of trigger warnings, but because of repeated exposure to the social identities of the characters.

Additionally, the researchers selected two emails, one written by Erika Christakis and one written by Bret Weinstein, which sparked campus wide protests at Yale University and Evergreen State College, respectively (Christakis, 2016; Hartocollis, 2017). To examine the degree to which trigger warnings influence one's perceptions and emotional reactions towards potentially distressing and discriminatory content, these emails were chosen not only because they are controversial, but also because of their ambiguous nature: students at these campuses believed the writers to have dispersed elements of hateful speech and marginalization, while others believed these students had overreacted and misrepresented the writers' intentions. Were these emails truly discriminatory towards marginalized bodies (specifically people of color), thus eliciting a rational and justified emotional response among those offended by the content, or were these students primed to perceive such elements when none actually existed? Therefore, these emails, along with the post-manipulation microaggressive passages, were chosen to examine the degree to which trigger warnings prime participants to identify elements of social discrimination when reading ambiguous literary material.

## **Measures**

### **TWAA**

The Trigger Warning Attitudes Assessment (TWAA) consists of two items that measure the extent to which participants believe trigger warnings should be presented prior to potentially distressing material. Participants are provided with a short description of a trigger warning and then asked if they think trigger warnings should be used. If participants indicate "yes", then they are asked to select from a list of 6 reasons why they think trigger warnings should be used.

Participants are also provided an “other” category, in which they can write their own reason if it is not listed. The TWAA is adopted from the study conducted by Bellet et al. (2018).

### **ODCS**

The Offensive and Discriminatory Content Scale (ODCS) was created to measure the extent to which participants believed each passage contained discriminatory language. Only 3 of the 6 questions were utilized as dependent measures. These 3 items were chosen because the researchers believed these questions to be suitable for encapsulating one’s perceptions towards particular language that may be discriminatory, as well as reflective of the manner through which microaggressions manifest (e.g., stereotyping). The other 3 questions behaved as filler items so as to limit participants’ susceptibility to understanding the true purpose of the study. Participants are asked, after each passage, to indicate the extent to which the passage they had just read promoted stereotyping (STP) social inequity (SI) and language that is offensive to marginalized groups (OL). Participants responded to each item, in a randomized order, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so).

### **SV-POMS**

The Shortened Version of the Profile of Mood States (SV-POMS), also referred to as the Profile of Mood States Short Form (POMS-SF), consists of 37 items that gauge participants’ affective states on various dimensions: tension-anxiety, anger-hostility, depression-dejection, depression-dejection, vigor-activity, confusion-bewilderment, and fatigue-inertia. Each dimension contains multiple items, and participants indicate the degree to which each item, presented in a randomized order, is reflective of their current mood on a scale from 0 (not at all)

to 4 (extremely). The SV-POMS has displayed excellent internal consistency, as well as high correlation between the original POMS dimensions ( $\alpha=.803$ ,  $r=.951$  for tension-anxiety,  $\alpha=.907$ ,  $r=.968$  for depression-dejection,  $\alpha=.899$ ,  $r=.972$  for anger-hostility,  $\alpha=.866$ ,  $r=.972$  for vigor-activity,  $\alpha=.872$ ,  $r=.979$  for fatigue-inertia, and  $\alpha=.819$ ,  $r=.961$  for confusion-bewilderment). The SV-POMS also displays a Total Mood Disturbance Score, which has been shown to highly correlate with the Total Mood Disturbance Score of the original POMS ( $r=.99$ ) (Shacham, 1983).

The SV-POMS has been used to measure psychological distress among people with breast cancer, bone marrow transplant survivors, extremely ill medical patients, homosexual men with AIDS, and, more importantly for the current study, healthy adults (Curran, Andrykowski, & Studts, 1995; DiLorenzo, Bovbjerg, Montgomery, Valdimarsdottir, & Jacobsen, 1999). In a study conducted by Curran, Andrykowski, & Studts (1995), the SV-POMS displayed excellent internal consistency among healthy adult populations ( $\alpha=.91$  for tension-anxiety,  $\alpha=.92$  for anger-hostility,  $\alpha=.95$  for depression-dejection,  $\alpha=.90$  for vigor-activity,  $\alpha=.94$  for fatigue-inertia,  $\alpha=.76$  for confusion-bewilderment, and  $\alpha=.87$  for Total Mood Disturbance Score), and in a study conducted by DiLorenzo, Bovbjerg, Montgomery, Valdimarsdottir, & Jacobsen (1999), the SV-POMS, again, displayed excellent internal consistency among healthy adult populations, as well as high correlations between the original POMS ( $\alpha=.90$ ,  $r=.99$  for tension-anxiety,  $\alpha=.95$ ,  $r=.98$  for depression-dejection,  $\alpha=.97$ ,  $r=.97$  for anger-hostility,  $\alpha=.95$ ,  $r=.99$  for vigor-activity,  $\alpha=.94$ ,  $r=.99$  for fatigue-inertia,  $\alpha=.73$ ,  $r=.96$  for confusion-bewilderment, and  $\alpha=.96$ ,  $r=.99$  for Total Mood Disturbance Score).

Given the high internal consistency of the SV-POMS dimensions, as well as the high correlation between the SV-POMS and the original POMS, the current study utilized the SV-POMS to measure the extent to which the various literary passages caused psychological distress

amongst participants. The current researchers only used the tension-anxiety (T-A) dimension in the final data analysis. The other 5 dimensions were included as filler items so as to mitigate participants' susceptibility to understanding the true purpose of the study. Responses were averaged for the tension-anxiety dimension to create a composite score.

### **Design**

The current study utilized a 2 (condition: trigger warning vs. no trigger warning) X 2 (time: pre-manipulation vs. post-manipulation) X 3 (passage: mildly distressing vs. email vs. microaggressive) between subjects factorial design. Our primary dependent variables were participants' responses towards the T-A dimension, the ODCS, and the TWAA.

### **Procedures**

Participants, recruited on Amazon's mTurk, were provided with a direct link to complete the survey on Qualtrics. After reading the consent form and agreeing to participate in the survey, participants first responded to demographic questions that asked for their age, gender identity, self-reported race and ethnicity, religious identity, and political orientation. Next participants responded to the WCHS. Participants then, during the pre-manipulation section of the survey, read one mildly distressing passage, one of the two emails, and one microaggressive passage. These passages were randomly selected from their respective pool (as described earlier), but the order in which each passage type was presented remained the same across participants. After reading each passage, participants responded to the SV-POMS and the ODCS. Then, half of the participants received trigger warnings before reading the next 7 passages while the other half

didn't receive any trigger warnings. The trigger warning provided to these participants was as followed:

**TRIGGER WARNING:** The following literary passage may contain material that may be offensive and/or disturbing to some people. If you are unable to continue participation in this survey, you may exit the survey at any time.

The trigger warning was displayed prior to each passage, and before reading the proceeding passage, participants had to click on the yellow arrow icon at the bottom of the screen. Participants were not made aware of any of the categories that the passages belonged to, nor were they informed as to why any particular passage had a trigger warning, other than the information described in the trigger warning. During the trigger warning manipulation, all participants read 7 passages in the same order: one markedly distressing passage, one microaggressive passage, one markedly racist passage, one microaggressive passage, one markedly distressing passage, one neutral passage, and one markedly racist passage. Each passage was randomly selected from their respective pool. After reading each passage, participants responded to the SV-POMS and ODCS.

Next, participants completed the post-manipulation measure, in which they read one mildly distressing passage, the other email, and then one microaggressive passage; none of the 3 passages received any preceding trigger warnings. After reading each passage, participants responded to the SV-POMS and ODCS. After completing the post-manipulation measure, all participants responded to the TWAA. Once completing the survey, participants were debriefed,

thanked for their time and careful attention to the literary passages and survey items, and provided an mTurk Code that allowed the researchers to compensate them for their participation.

### Results

A two-way MANOVA was conducted to examine a potential main effect for participants' self-identified gender, race and ethnicity, religious orientation, political orientation, and age on their responses to the ODCS and T-A dimension of the SV-POMS. For the age demographic, participants were categorized as belonging within the range of 18-25 years old, 26-40 years old, 41-60 years old, or 61+. Therefore, 17 participants were 18-25 years old, 59 participants were 26-40 years old, 40 participants were 41-60 years old, and 12 participants were 61 years old or older. For the race and ethnicity demographic, participants were categorized as white or as non-white, with 89 belonging to the former and 38 belonging to the latter. For the political orientation demographic, participants who indicated a rating between 1 and 20 were categorized as extremely conservative, participants who indicated a rating between 21 and 40 were categorized as conservative, participants who indicated a rating between 41 and 60 were categorized as moderate, participants who indicated a rating between 61 and 80 were categorized as liberal, and participants who indicated a rating between 81 and 100 were categorized as extremely liberal. Therefore, 17 participants were categorized as extremely conservative, 15 participants were categorized as conservative, 43 were categorized as moderate, 21 were categorized as liberal, and 32 were categorized as extremely liberal.

The two-way MANOVA showed a significant main effect for gender,  $F(25, 85)=1.96$ ,  $p=.012$ ; *Wilk's*  $\lambda=.63$ , *partial*  $n^2=.366$ , and religious orientation,  $F(25, 85)=2.10$ ,  $p=.006$ ; *Wilk's*  $\lambda=.62$ , *partial*  $n^2=.38$ , at the  $p<.05$  level. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to

compare the effect of trigger warnings on males vs. females. For the mildly distressing passages, there was a significant interaction between participants' gender and trigger warnings for the OL item of the ODCS,  $F(1, 91)=4.584, p=.035$ . For the emails, there was no significant interaction between gender and trigger warnings for any of the items. For the microaggressive passages, there was no significant interaction between gender and trigger warnings for any of the items.

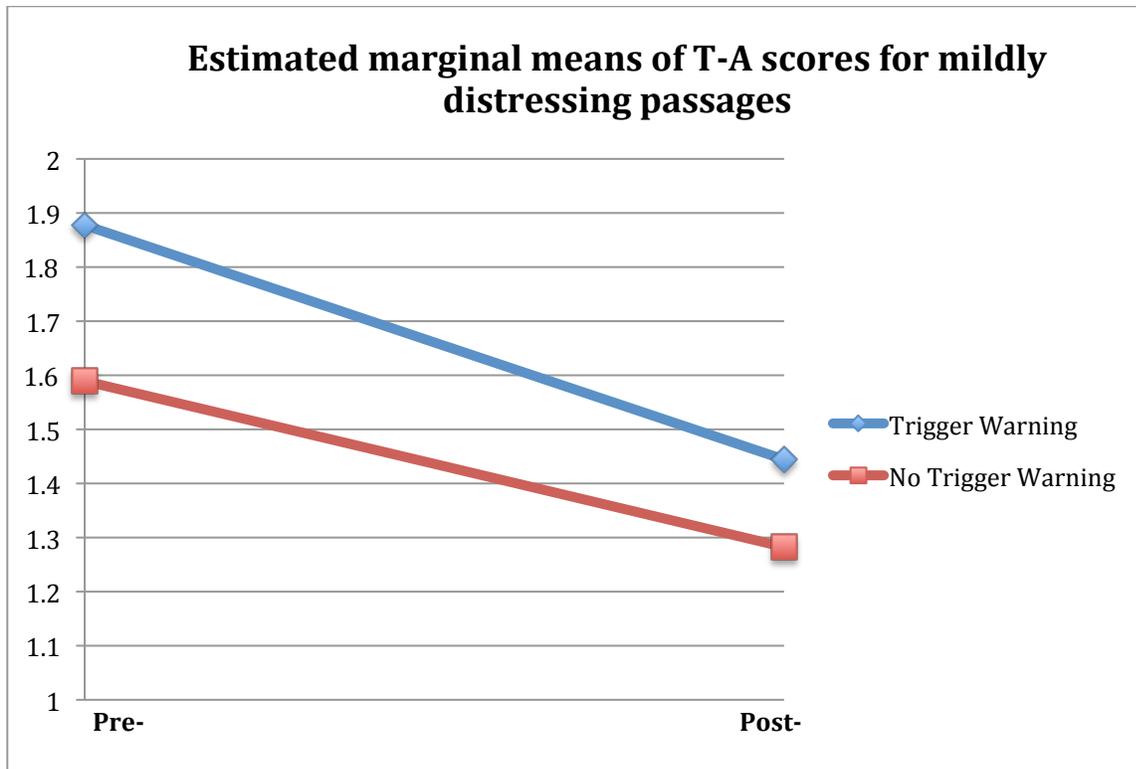
A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of trigger warnings on religious orientation regarding participants' responses to each particular post-manipulation passage. For the post-manipulation mildly distressing passage, there was a significant interaction between participants' religious orientation and trigger warnings for the OL item of the ODCS,  $F(7, 91)=3.19, p=.005$ . For the emails, there was no significant interaction between religious orientation and trigger warnings for any of the items. For the microaggressive passages, there was no significant interaction between gender and trigger warnings for any of the items. The researchers also conducted a chi square test of independence to examine the effect of participants' demographic characteristics on their ratings on the TWAA, but found a significant interaction only for age,  $X^2(3, N=126)=13.40, p=.004$ . Because there were so few significant interactions between demographics and trigger warnings, the researchers concluded that there were no relevant differences amongst participants, and therefore, participants, for the remainder of the data analysis, were categorized depending on their treatment level (trigger warnings vs. no trigger warnings).

A one-way MANOVA was conducted with trigger warning as an independent variable and participants' responses towards the ODCS and T-A dimension as dependent variables. A significant interaction effect was found for group and time,  $F(4, 116)=14.97, p<.001$ ; *Wilk's*  $\lambda=.66, \text{partial } n^2=.34$ , meaning the change between pre- and post-manipulation

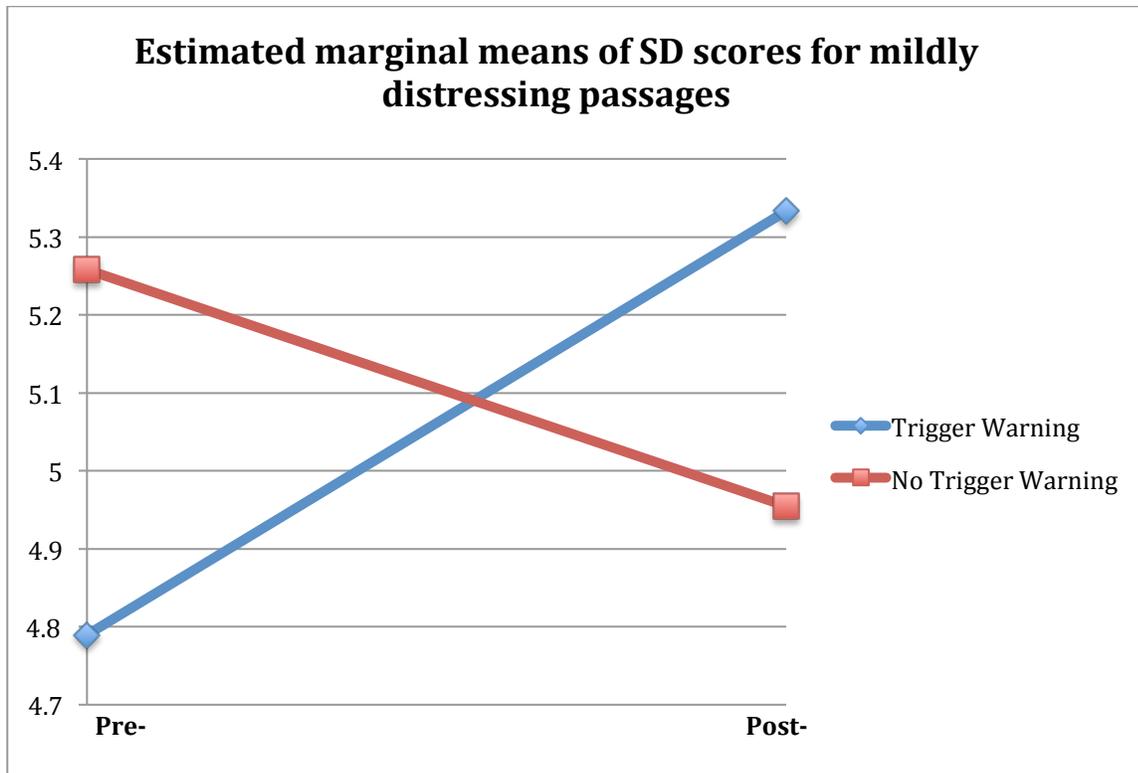
ratings amongst participants who received trigger warnings was significantly different than the change between pre- and post-manipulation ratings amongst participants who didn't receive trigger warnings. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of trigger warnings on participants' evaluations towards the post-manipulation passages. There was a significant effect for trigger warnings on participants' ratings on the T-A dimension,  $F(1, 119)=6.68, p=.011$ , STP item,  $F(1, 119)=12.58, p=.001$ , and SI item,  $F(1, 119)=7.85, p=.006$ . There was no significant effect for trigger warnings on participants' ratings on the OL item,  $F(1, 119)=.46, p=.497$ . For better simplicity and ease during analysis, the researchers combined participants' STP scores with their SI scores to create an overall social discrimination score (SD). This new SD score was utilized to gauge the extent to which participants believed the post-manipulation passages to reflect elements of social discrimination.

### **Post-manipulation mildly distressing passages**

Post hoc comparisons using Fisher's LSD test indicated that the T-A mean score for participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=1.44, SD=1.08$ ) was significantly higher than the T-A mean score for participants who didn't receive trigger warnings ( $M=1.24, SD=1.20$ ),  $F(1, 121)=476.459, p<.001$ . For the SD mean score, participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=5.33, SD=3.87$ ) showed somewhat significantly higher scores than participants that didn't receive trigger warnings ( $M=4.95, SD=3.58$ ),  $F(1, 121)=3.57, p=.061$ .



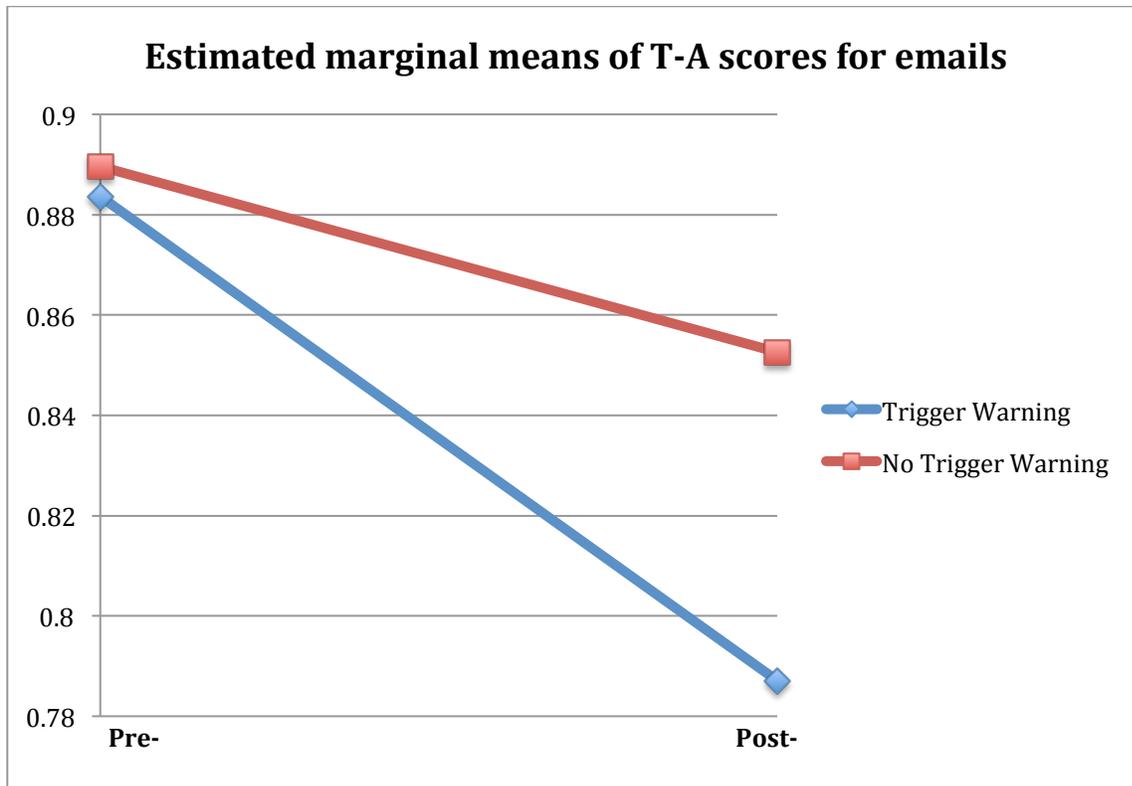
**Figure 1.** Marginal means of T-A scores for the mildly distressing passages shown during the pre-manipulation and shown during the post-manipulation. Participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=1.44$ ,  $SD=1.08$ ,  $n=61$ ) displayed significantly higher scores during the post-manipulation compared to participants who didn't receive any trigger warnings ( $M=1.24$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ,  $n=67$ ).



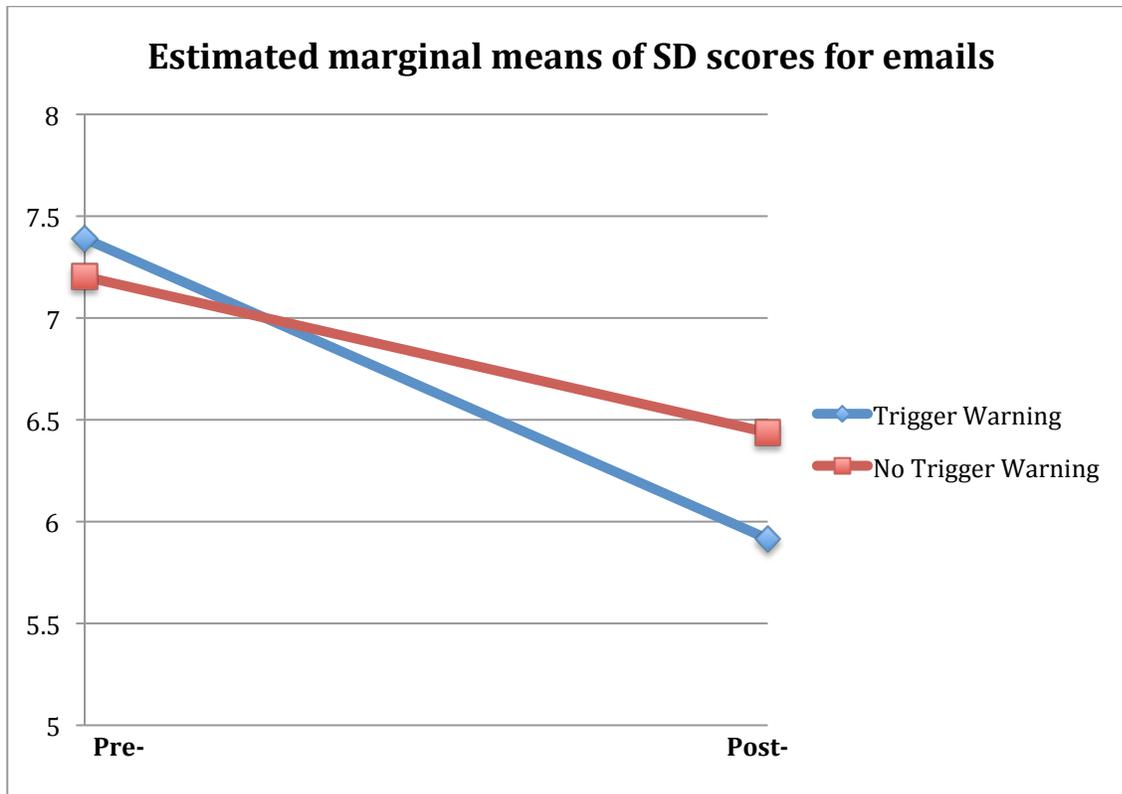
**Figure 2.** Marginal means of SD scores for the mildly distressing passages shown during the pre-manipulation and shown during the post-manipulation. Participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=5.33$ ,  $SD=3.87$ ) displayed somewhat significantly higher scores during the post-manipulation compared to participants who didn't receive any trigger warnings ( $M=4.95$ ,  $SD=3.58$ ).

### Post-manipulation emails

Post hoc comparisons using Fisher's LSD test indicated that the T-A mean score for participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=.79$ ,  $SD=.92$ ) was significantly lower than participants who didn't receive any trigger warnings ( $M=.85$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ),  $F(1, 121)=16.36$ ,  $p<.001$ . For the SD mean score, participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=5.91$ ,  $SD=4.05$ ) showed significantly higher scores than participants who didn't receive trigger warnings ( $M=6.44$ ,  $SD=4.32$ ),  $F(1, 121)=136.87$ ,  $p<.001$ .



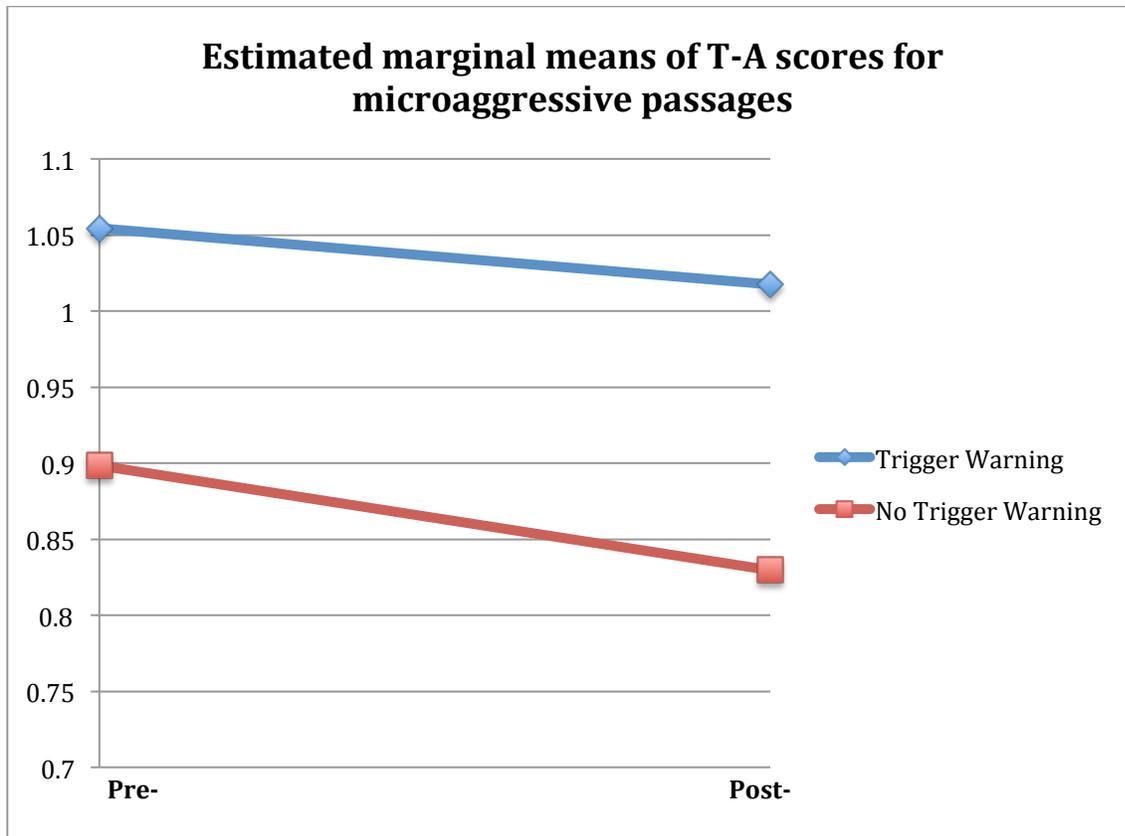
**Figure 3.** Marginal means of T-A scores for the emails shown during the pre-manipulation and shown during the post-manipulation. Participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=.79$ ,  $SD=.92$ ) displayed significantly lower scores during the post-manipulation compared to participants who didn't receive any trigger warnings ( $M=.85$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ).



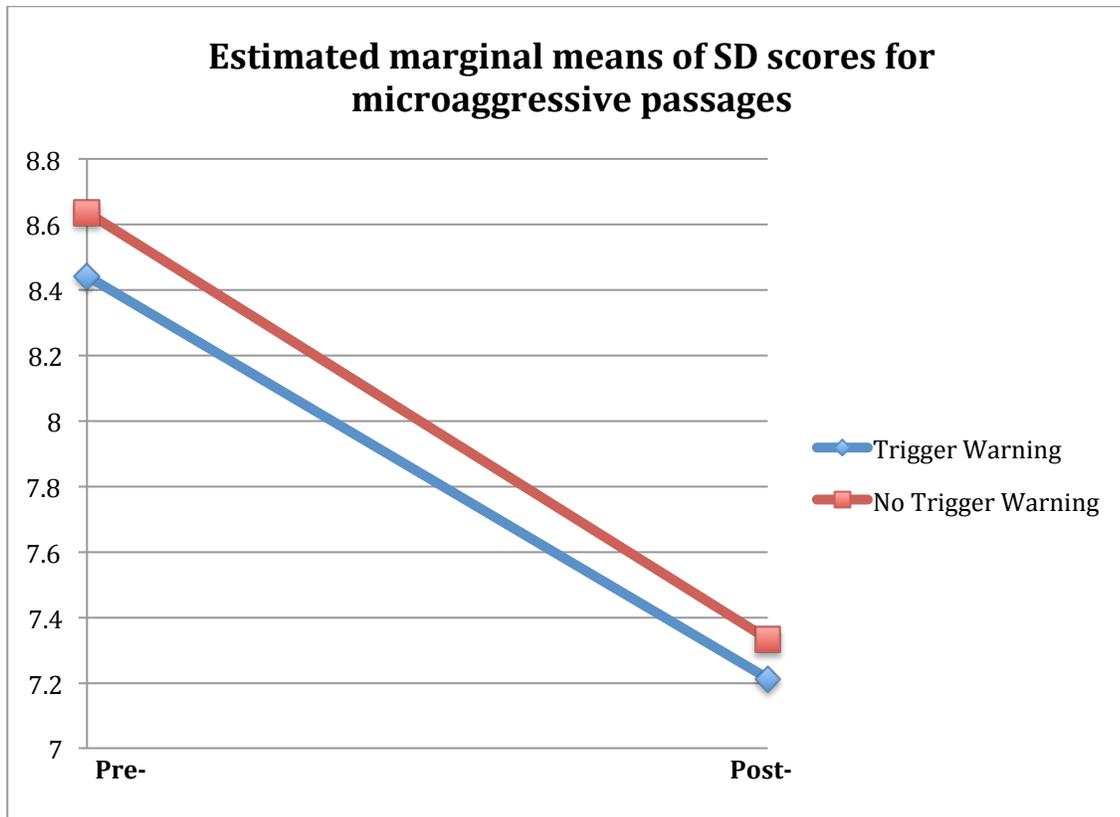
**Figure 4.** Marginal means of SD scores for the emails shown during the pre-manipulation and shown during the post-manipulation. Participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=5.91$ ,  $SD=4.05$ ) displayed significantly lower scores during the post-manipulation compared to participants who didn't receive any trigger warnings ( $M=6.44$ ,  $SD=4.32$ ).

#### Post-manipulation microaggressive passages

Post hoc comparisons using Fisher's LSD test indicated that the T-A mean score for participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=.95$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) was significantly higher than the T-A mean score for participants who didn't receive trigger warnings ( $M=.80$ ,  $SD=1.03$ ),  $F(1, 125)=16.31$ ,  $p<.001$ . For the SD mean score, participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=7.21$ ,  $SD=4.15$ ) showed significantly lower scores than participants who didn't receive trigger warnings ( $M=7.33$ ,  $SD=4.48$ ),  $F(1, 125)=139.09$ ,  $p<.001$ .



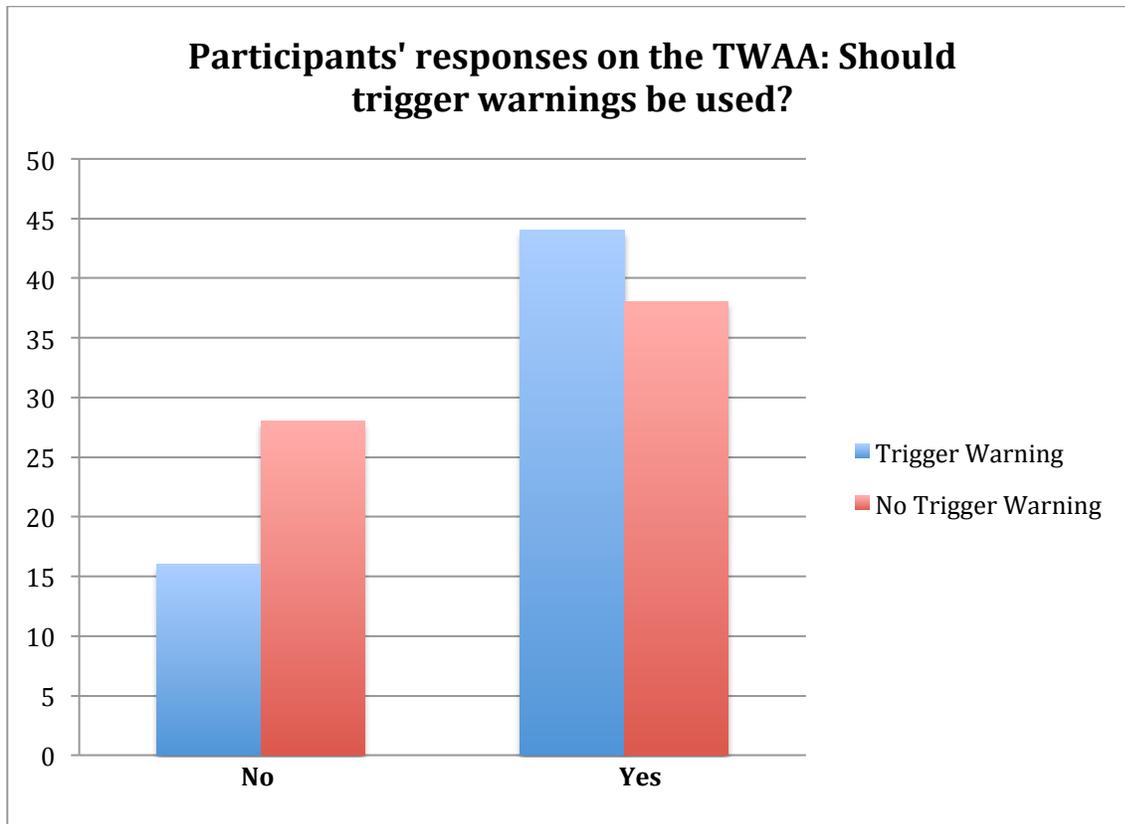
**Figure 5.** Marginal means of T-A scores for the microaggressive passages shown during the pre-manipulation and shown during the post-manipulation. Participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=.95$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) displayed significantly higher scores during the post-manipulation compared to participants who didn't receive any trigger warnings ( $M=.80$ ,  $SD=1.03$ ).



**Figure 6.** Marginal means of SD scores for the microaggressive passages shown during the pre-manipulation and shown during the post-manipulation. Participants who received trigger warnings ( $M=7.21$ ,  $SD=4.15$ ) displayed significantly lower scores during the post-manipulation compared to participants who didn't receive any trigger warnings ( $M=7.33$ ,  $SD=4.48$ ).

### TWAA

A chi square test of independence was conducted to examine the effect of trigger warnings on participants' ratings on the TWAA. There was a nearly significant relationship between trigger warnings and TWAA response,  $X^2(1, N=126)=3.43$ ,  $p=.064$ . In support of the second hypothesis, participants who received trigger warnings were somewhat more likely to indicate that trigger warnings should be given prior to potentially distressing material than participants who didn't receive trigger warnings.



**Figure 7.** Participants' responses on the TWAA. 73.3% of participants who received trigger warnings and 57.6% of participants who didn't receive trigger warnings indicated that trigger warnings should be used. Participants who received trigger warnings were somewhat more likely to indicate that trigger warnings should be presented before potentially distressing material compared to participants that didn't receive trigger warnings.

### Discussion

The current study attempted to examine the degree to which trigger warnings influenced participants' perceptions towards potentially distressing and/or discriminatory literary passages that were presented without any such warnings. The researchers hypothesized that trigger warnings would cause participants to evaluate the post-manipulation mildly distressing passage, email, and microaggressive passage as more distressing, and the post-manipulation microaggressive passage and email as more reflective of elements of social discrimination. The results showed significant support for the priming effects of trigger warnings, but in a manner

not expected by the researchers. Supporting the findings of Bellet et al. (2018), participants who received trigger warnings indicated higher levels of psychological distress after reading the post-manipulation mildly distressing passage, as well as the post-manipulation microaggressive passage, but indicated lower levels of distress after reading the post-manipulation email compared to participants that didn't receive trigger warnings.

When responding to the ODCS items, participants who received trigger warnings indicated the post-manipulation microaggressive passage and email to be less socially discriminatory than participants who didn't receive trigger warnings, but evaluated the mildly distressing passage as being more socially discriminatory. From these results, then, trigger warnings appeared to have elicited a dual priming effect: trigger warnings both desensitized participants to elements of social discrimination, but also caused hypersensitivity to language that promotes social inequity and stereotyping.

The researchers theorize that the material following a trigger warning establishes a typical example as to the kinds of content that are deserving of such a caution, and when participants read the post-manipulation passages, they may have compared the content of these passages to the content presented during the manipulation. When reading passages that contained overt and extreme examples of discrimination, participants may have perceived the use of a trigger warning as justified, thus creating a standard by which proceeding passages were compared to. In other words, trigger warnings may create an anchor through the association of the language in a particular literary work with the language in the trigger warning (e.g., "may contain material that may be offensive and/or disturbing"). If participants believed that the racist passages contained sufficient examples of offensive and/or disturbing material, then they may

have anchored their evaluations of the post-manipulation microaggressive passage and email on such.

Since the post-manipulation microaggressive passage and email don't contain overt examples of discrimination, but still depict elements of social identity (such as race and gender), participants that received trigger warnings may have perceived these passages as less socially inequitable and stereotyping than participants that didn't receive trigger warnings because of this anchoring effect. The material found in the racist passages, microaggressive passages, and the emails share similar language, but differ in the degree to which social discrimination is apparent. Therefore, participants who received trigger warnings evaluated the post-manipulation microaggressive passage and email as less discriminatory because, while the language was similar, the ambiguous manner through which social discrimination manifested in these passages was compared to the typified standard established by the trigger warning, which preceded overt and intense examples of racism.

The use of trigger warnings before the racist passages, though, may have also caused hypersensitivity to elements of social discrimination in material that didn't contain rhetoric centered on social identity, which could explain why these participants evaluated the post-manipulation mildly distressing passage as more discriminatory than participants who didn't receive trigger warnings. The mildly distressing passages, unlike the emails or the microaggressive passages, don't share the same language as the racist passages, and therefore, in accordance with the researchers' theory, the anchor established by the trigger warning doesn't generalize to the content presented in the mildly distressing passages.

Yet, the trigger warning may have cued participants in to the discriminatory themes explored in the racist passages, and this priming may be responsible for the discrepancies

between the two groups' evaluations of the post-manipulation mildly distressing passage. Since participants are unable to compare the language of the mildly distressing passage to the language of the racist passage, their perception towards the degree of social discrimination invoked through the former isn't lessened because no suitable anchor had been established. Instead, their perception is heightened through selective attention (to elements of discrimination) that was elicited through the trigger warnings that preceded the racist passages.

In sum, based on the results of the current study, the researchers theorize that, when people are presented material that shares similar language as the content that followed a trigger warning, they're desensitized to the themes explored through that particular work. However, when people are presented material that doesn't share similar language, they're hypersensitive to the themes explored through the content that followed a trigger warning. Applying this theory to a university setting, then, adds a unique perspective to the trigger warning and microaggression debate, in that, trigger warnings, depending on the method of use, could cause greater difficulty in identifying microaggressions as they manifest, or could cause individuals to perceive acts of social discrimination when none may actually exist.

If trigger warnings are presented before material and discussions that pertain to overt forms of discrimination, then the more subtle manifestations of microaggressions may go unnoticed. Whether or not this would lead to greater psychological and affective distress or lessen the severity of such repercussions among victims of microaggressions is unknown, for their peers and professors may trivialize their experiences to a greater degree, or victims of microaggressions may find these interactions to be less extreme compared to the material that received trigger warnings. Trigger warnings, though, may cause one to perceive microaggressions in domains that don't contain elements of social identity or discrimination,

which could lead to less distress among victims of microaggressions because they may feel as though their experiences are prioritized and understood by their peers and professors, or could lead to greater distress as their environment and curriculum transforms into a constant reminder of marginalization and discrimination. Regardless, more research is needed to examine the repercussions of trigger warnings, for their application within the university may have unintended consequences that could harm the very bodies proponents seek to protect.

### **Limitations and future directions**

There are some limitations that undermine the validity and generalizability of the results. First, participants responded to 43 items after each passage, and with 13 passages to read, as well as the TWAA, participants responded to a total of 561 items. Such a large number of questions could have undermined the degree of distress elicited from the passages and/or trigger warnings. Also, since participants responded to the same items for each passage, regardless of whether or not the passage contained elements of distress and/or discrimination, participants may have compared their perceptions towards the racist and markedly distressing passages to their responses on the T-A dimension and ODCS for the less extreme passages (e.g., the neutral passage), meaning a potentially heightened reaction towards the former may not have solely been the result of the trigger warning. To add to this, participants were presented trigger warnings before each passage, but because passages varied regarding their degree of distress and social discrimination, the effects of trigger warnings upon participants' perceptions towards the markedly distressing and racist passages may have been lessened, since the trigger warning wasn't applied solely to material that could be perceived as offensive and/or disturbing (as was iterated in the trigger warning).

Therefore, the priming effects elicited from the trigger warnings may have been undermined since not all passages could have justified the use of the trigger warning. One could create an additional group that receives trigger warnings only for the markedly racist and markedly discriminatory passages and compare these participants' responses on the ODCS items and T-A dimension towards the responses of the two groups examined in the current study. If participants in this new condition were to display stark differences between their responses and the responses of participants who received trigger warnings for all passages during the manipulation, then this would provide further support that the psychological and affective repercussions of trigger warnings are context specific, meaning the content that follows a trigger warning influences the manner through which one perceives proceeding material that shares or doesn't share similar language.

Another limitation is that there are multiple ways to conceptualize social discrimination, and the passages that contained elements of social identity may not have encapsulated the totality of the behaviors, language, and beliefs considered to be discriminatory towards marginalized bodies. Therefore, the stereotyping and social inequity items of the ODCS, both of which were combined to create the SD item for the final data analysis, are not the only two levels on which to measure participants' perceptions towards potentially discriminatory material. Also, many of the passages used are found in popular books that are widely discussed throughout high schools and colleges in the US, so some participants may have recognized the material during the survey. This not only would lessen the degree of psychological distress elicited when reading potentially distressing and/or discriminatory content, but would also operate to contextualize the material, which may have influenced participants' perceptions towards the microaggressive and racist passages. If participants knew of the book(s) in which these particular passages were found, then

the ambiguity of the microaggressive passages would be undermined and the discriminatory language contained within the racist passages would be contextualized through the story as a whole.

Lastly, to provide further evidence for the researchers' theory regarding the dual priming effect of trigger warnings, one should analyze participants' responses on the ODCS items and T-A dimension after each passage during the trigger warning manipulation. If participants who received trigger warnings evaluated the racist passages as more distressing and socially discriminatory than participants who didn't receive trigger warnings, then this would provide further support for the theory, in that the heightened response elicited from these passages influenced the manner through which participants perceived the post-manipulation passages. As for the markedly distressing passages, if participants who received trigger warnings evaluated these as more distressing, but showed no significant difference between their responses on the ODCS items compared to participants that didn't receive trigger warnings (or even more valuable for the theory, showed significantly higher ratings), then this would be further evidence for the dual priming effect of trigger warnings.

Despite these limitations, the results of the current study offer a potential theoretical framework regarding trigger warnings and their implementation. However, more research is needed to further test the theory provided by the researchers.

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## Appendix

### Survey Items

#### Demographic questions

How old are you?

- (On a slider bar from a scale of 1-99)

What is your gender identity?

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Prefer not to answer
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is your self-reported race and ethnicity?

- Non-Hispanic White
- Non-Hispanic Black
- Hispanic or Latino
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian/Asian American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Biracial/multiracial
- Prefer not to answer
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is your current religion, if any?

- Catholic (including Roman Catholic and Orthodox)
- Protestant (including Anglican, Orthodox, Baptist, and Lutheran)
- Christian Orthodox
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Sikh
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Agnostic
- Atheist
- Prefer not to answer
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is your political orientation?

- (On a slider bar from 1-100)
- 1=extremely conservative, 100= extremely liberal, 50=moderate

## Trigger Warning Attitudes Assessment: TWAA

Adopted from:

Bellet, B.W., Jones, P.J., & McNally, R.J. (2018). Trigger warning: Empirical evidence ahead. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental psychiatry*, 61, 134-141.

1. A “trigger warning” is a statement given prior to presented material that allows the viewer to prepare for or avoid distress that it may cause.

Do you think that trigger warnings should be given prior to potentially distressing material?

- Yes
- No

If your answer to Question 1 is “Yes”:

2. Why do you think that trigger warnings should be used? (select all that apply):

- Trigger warnings help to protect vulnerable populations (such as people who have posttraumatic stress disorder) from psychological harm.
- It’s not fair that vulnerable people, such as those with posttraumatic stress disorder, should be exposed to material that causes them distress without a warning.
- Presenting material that is offensive to a specific group of people (racist or sexist material, for example) can cause psychological harm to members of that group.
- It’s not fair to present material that is offensive to a specific group of people (material that is racist or sexist, for example).
- Offensive material can cause psychological harm to anyone.
- It’s not fair to present material that is offensive to anyone without giving a warning first.
- Other (please describe here): \_\_\_\_\_

## Shortened Version of the Profile of Mood States: SV-POMS

Adopted from:

DiLorenzo, T.A., Bovbjerg, D.H., Montgomery, G.H., Valdimarsdottir, H., & Jacobsen, P.B. (1999). The application of a shortened version of the profile of mood states in a sample of breast cancer chemotherapy patients. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 4, 315-325.

On a scale from 0-4 (0=not at all, 4=extremely), please indicate the degree to which the passage you just read made you feel:

Tension-anxiety dimension:

- Tense
- On edge
- Uneasy
- Restless
- Nervous
- Anxious

Anger-hostility dimension:

- Angry
- Peeved
- Grouchy
- Annoyed
- Resentful
- Bitter
- Furious

Depression-dejection dimension:

- Unhappy
- Sad
- Blue
- Hopeless
- Discouraged
- Miserable
- Helpless
- Worthless

Vigour-activity dimension:

- Lively
- Active
- Energetic
- Cheerful
- Full of pep
- Vigorous

Fatigue-inertia dimension:

- Worn out
- Fatigued
- Bushed
- Exhausted
- Weary

Confusion-bewilderment dimension:

- Confused
- Unable to concentrate
- Bewildered
- Forgetful
- Uncertain about things

Offensive and Discriminatory Content Scale: ODCS

On a scale from 1-7 (1=not at all, 7=very much so), to what extent does the text promote altruism?

On a scale from 1-7 (1=not at all, 7=very much so), to what extent does the text promote critical thinking skills?

**On a scale from 1-7 (1=not at all, 7=very much so), to what extent does the text promote gender, racial, or other stereotypes of social identity?**

**On a scale from 1-7 (1=not at all, 7=very much so), to what extent does the text promote economic, gender, racial, or other social inequities?**

**On a scale from 1-7 (1=not at all, 7=very much so), to what extent does the text promote the use of language offensive to marginalized groups?**

On a scale from 1-7 (1=not at all, 7=very much so), to what extent does the text promote family bonding?

## Literary Passages

### Emails

Nicholas and I have heard from a number of students who were frustrated by the mass email sent to the student body about appropriate Halloween-wear. I've always found Halloween an interesting embodiment of more general adult worries about young people. As some of you may be aware, I teach a class on "The Concept of the Problem Child," and I was speaking with some of my students yesterday about the ways in which Halloween – traditionally a day of subversion for children and young people – is also an occasion for adults to exert their control.

When I was young, adults were freaked out by the specter of Halloween candy poisoned by lunatics, or spiked with razor blades (despite the absence of a single recorded case of such an event). Now, we've grown to fear the sugary candy itself. And this year, we seem afraid that college students are unable to decide how to dress themselves on Halloween.

I don't wish to trivialize genuine concerns about cultural and personal representation, and other challenges to our lived experience in a plural community. I know that many decent people have proposed guidelines on Halloween costumes from a spirit of avoiding hurt and offense. I laud those goals, in theory, as most of us do. But in practice, I wonder if we should reflect more transparently, as a community, on the consequences of an institutional (which is to say: bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students.

It seems to me that we can have this discussion of costumes on many levels: we can talk about complex issues of identity, free speech, cultural appropriation, and virtue "signalling." But I wanted to share my thoughts with you from a totally different angle, as an educator concerned with the developmental stages of childhood and young adulthood.

As a former preschool teacher, for example, it is hard for me to give credence to a claim that there is something objectionably "appropriative" about a blonde-haired child's wanting to be Mulan for a day. Pretend play is the foundation of most cognitive tasks, and it seems to me that we want to be in the business of encouraging the exercise of imagination, not constraining it. I suppose we could agree that there is a difference between fantasizing about an individual character vs. appropriating a culture, wholesale, the latter of which could be seen as (tacky)(offensive)(jejeune)(hurtful), take your pick. But, then, I wonder what is the statute of limitations on dreaming of dressing as Tiana the Frog Princess if you aren't a black girl from New Orleans? Is it okay if you are eight, but not 18? I don't know the answer to these questions; they seem unanswerable. Or at the least, they put us on slippery terrain that I, for one, prefer not to cross.

Which is my point. I don't, actually, trust myself to foist my Halloweenish standards and motives on others. I can't defend them anymore than you could defend yours. Why do we dress up on Halloween, anyway? Should we start explaining that too? I've always been a good mimic and I enjoy accents. I love to travel, too, and have been to every continent but Antarctica. When I lived in Bangladesh, I bought a sari because it was beautiful, even though I looked stupid in it and never wore it once. Am I fetishizing and appropriating others' cultural experiences? Probably. But I really, really like them too.

Even if we could agree on how to avoid offense – and I’ll note that no one around campus seems overly concerned about the offense taken by religiously conservative folks to skin-revealing costumes – I wonder, and I am not trying to be provocative: Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious... a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive? American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience; increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition. And the censure and prohibition come from above, not from yourselves! Are we all okay with this transfer of power? Have we lost faith in young people’s capacity – in your capacity – to exercise self-censure, through social norming, and also in your capacity to ignore or reject things that trouble you? We tend to view this shift from individual to institutional agency as a tradeoff between libertarian vs. liberal values (“liberal” in the American, not European sense of the word).

[My husband] says, if you don’t like a costume someone is wearing, look away, or tell them you are offended. Talk to each other. Free speech and the ability to tolerate offence are the hallmarks of a free and open society.

But – again, speaking as a child development specialist – I think there might be something missing in our discourse about the exercise of free speech (including how we dress ourselves) on campus, and it is this: What does this debate about Halloween costumes say about our view of young adults, of their strength and judgment?

In other words: Whose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people? It’s not mine, I know that.

Happy Halloween.

By Erika Christakis

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When you first described the new structure for Day of Absence/Day of Presence, at a past faculty meeting (where no room was left for questions), I thought I must have misunderstood what you said. Later emails seemed to muddy the waters further, while inviting commitments to participate. I now see from the boldfaced text in this email that I had indeed understood your words correctly.

There is a huge difference between a group or coalition deciding to voluntarily absent themselves from a shared space in order to highlight their vital and under-appreciated roles (the theme of the Douglas Turner Ward play *Day of Absence*, as well as the recent Women's Day walkout), and a group or coalition encouraging another group to go away. The first is a forceful call to consciousness which is, of course, crippling to the logic of oppression. The second is a show of force, and an act of oppression in and of itself.

You may take this letter as a formal protest of this year's structure, and you may assume I will be on campus on the Day of Absence. I would encourage others to put phenotype aside and reject this new formulation, whether they have 'registered' for it already or not. On a college campus, one's right to speak-or to be- must never be based on skin color.

If there was interest in a public presentation and discussion of race through a scientific/evolutionary lens, I would be quite willing to organize such an event (it is material I have taught in my own programs, and guest lectured on). Everyone would be equally welcome and encouraged to attend such a forum, irrespective of ethnicity, belief structure, native language, political leanings, or position at the college. My only requirement would be that people attend with an open mind, and a willingness to act in good faith.

By Bret Weinstein

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**Distressing passages that didn't contain elements of social identity**

Adopted from:

Bellet, B.W., Jones, P.J., & McNally, R.J. (2018). Trigger warning: Empirical evidence ahead. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental psychiatry*, 61, 134-141.

### Mildly Distressing Passages

Ralph heard the great rock before he saw it. He was aware of a jolt in the earth that came to him through the soles of his feet, and the breaking sound of stones at the top of the cliff. Then the monstrous red thing bounded across the neck and he flung himself flat while the tribe shrieked. The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy, saying nothing, with no time for even a grunt, traveled through the air sideways from the rock, turning over as he went. The rock bounded twice and was lost in the forest. Piggy fell forty feet and landed on his back across the square red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red. Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed. Then the sea breathed again in a long, slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock; and when it went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone.

This time the silence was complete. Ralph's lips formed a word but no sound came.

From *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding

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Back in January, the month of fires, Larry had picked up a burn call while I was getting coffee. I was so angry I gave him a hell ride over there, but I felt no better for it even after I hit eighty-five on Twelfth, with Larry standing on his seat, his back pressed against the cab's roof, mumbling, "Oh Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." We pulled up as the fire trucks were leaving. I drove into the park behind the baseball fields, toward the lights of the police car. The cop had taken out the yellow death tape and was roping off a clump of bushes. In a clearing in the center, a large pile of old clothes and paperback books still smoldered. A black arm was sticking out from the bottom. The fire had burned it so thoroughly in parts that the skin had stretched open, showing the cooked white meat beneath. Larry and I pulled off the books to reveal the charred body, the whites of the eyes burned yellow. "There's a can of gas over there," the cop said. "Someone must have lit him up and then piled those books on. I'm going to Aruba next week." Larry went back to the bus for his camera.

From *Bringing out the Dead*, by Joe Connelly

---

The 28th was pinned down for four hours, its crouching boys getting picked off with sickening regularity, before it could start moving again.

And movement without cover offered only more danger. Easy (Company), strung out in a long line, scampered across the hard rock toward the island's northern tip. The gunfire directed at them was intermittent but deadly. My father was following Hank Hansen across a crust of exposed ground when he saw Hank crumple up. No one had heard a shot, and at first Doc thought the sergeant had tripped and fallen. But Hansen did not get back up, and as the other Marines scattered, Doc ran to him and pulled him into a nearby shell crater.

The bullet had entered Hansen's back and exited through his abdomen... Hansen was dying, but Doc's cry for assistance saved his own life. Tex Hips came sliding into the crater to assist the corpsman. Then he glanced over Doc's shoulder and shouted, "Watch out, Bradley!" Four Japanese, one brandishing a sword, were charging him, screaming, "Banzai!" Hips dropped the sword-wielding officer and one soldier with his M1; the other two retreated. Now two Marines came tearing on to the scene, hurling grenades at the Japanese, who were disappearing into a hole. After it was cleaned out, ten enemy bodies were discovered.

From *Flags of Our Fathers*, by James Bradley

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Brigid O'Shaughnessy jumped up from her chair. Her lower lip was between her teeth. Her eyes were dark and wide in a tense white face. She took two quick steps toward Cairo. He started to rise. Her right hand went out and cracked sharply against his cheek, leaving the imprint of fingers there. Cairo grunted and slapped her cheek, staggering her sidewise, bringing from her mouth a brief muffled scream. Spade, wooden of face, was up from the sofa and close to them by then. He caught Cairo by the throat and shook him. Cairo gurgled and put a hand inside his coat. Spade grasped the Levantine's wrist, wrenched it away from his coat, forced it straight out to the side, and twisted it until the clumsy flaccid fingers opened to let the black pistol fall down on the rug...

He released Cairo's wrist and with a thick open hand struck the side of his face three times, savagely. Cairo tried to spit in Spade's face, but the dryness of the Levantine's mouth made it only an angry gesture. Spade slapped the mouth, cutting the lower lip... Spade stared gloomily for a moment at the blood trickling from Cairo's lip, and then stepped back, taking his hand from the Levantine's throat.

From *The Maltese Falcon*, by Dashiell Hammett

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We show them how to take cover from aircraft, how to simulate a dead man when one is overrun in an attack, how to time hand-grenades so that they explode half a second before hitting the ground; we teach them to fling themselves into holes as quick as lightning before the shells with instantaneous fuses; we show them how to clean up a trench with a handful of bombs... They listen, they are docile – but when it begins again, in their excitement they do everything wrong.

Haie Westhus drags off with a great wound in his back through which the lung pulses at every breath. I can only press his hand; "It's all up, Paul," he groans and he bites his arm because of the pain.

We see men living with their skulls blown open; we see soldiers run with their two feet cut off, they stagger on their splintered stumps into the next shell-hole; a lance-corporal crawls a mile and half on his hands dragging his smashed knee after him; another goes to the dressing station and over his clasped hand bulge his intestines; we see men without mouths, without jaws, without faces; we find one man who has held the artery of his arm in his teeth for two hours in order not to bleed to death. The sun goes down, night comes, the shells whine, life is at an end. Still the little piece of convulsed earth in which we lie is held.

From *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by Erich Maria Remarque

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Then there was a vicious snarling in the mouth of the shelter and the plunge and thump of living things. ...Ralph and Piggy's corner became a complication of snarls and crashes and flying limbs. Ralph hit out; then he and what seemed like a dozen others were rolling over and over, hitting, biting, scratching. He was torn and jolted, found fingers in his mouth, and bit them. A fist withdrew and came back like a piston, so that the whole shelter exploded into light. Ralph twisted sideways on top of a writhing body and felt hot breath on his cheek. He began to pound the mouth below him, using his clenched fist as a hammer; he hit with more and more passionate hysteria as the face became slippery. A knee jerked up between his legs and he fell sideways, busying himself with his pain, and the fight rolled over him. Then the shelter collapsed with smothering finality; and the anonymous shapes fought their way out and through. Dark figures drew themselves out of the wreckage and flitted away, till the screams of the littluns and Piggy's gasps were once more audible.

From *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding

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### Neutral Passages

They crossed the river under the white quartermoon naked and pale and thin atop their horses. They'd stuffed their boots upside down into their jeans and stuffed their shirts and jackets after along with their warbags of shaving gear and ammunition and they belted their jeans shut at the waist and tied the legs loosely about their necks and dressed only in their hats they led the horses out onto the gravel spit and loosed the girthstraps and mounted and put the horses into the water with their naked heels.

Midriver the horses were swimming, snorting and stretching their necks out of the water, their tails afloat behind. They quartered downstream with the current, the naked riders leaning forward and talking to the horses, Rawlins holding the rifle aloft in one hand, lined out behind one another and making for the alien shore like a party of marauders...

They rode up out of the river among the willows and rode single file upstream through the shallows onto a long gravel beach where they took off their hats and turned and looked back at the country they'd left. No one spoke. Then suddenly they put their horses to a gallop up the beach and turned and came back, fanning with their hats and laughing and pulling up and patting the horses on the shoulder....

They sat smoking on the horses in the moonlight and looked at one another. Then quietly they dismounted and unslung their clothes from about their necks and dressed and led the horses up out of the willow breaks and gravel benches and out upon the plain where they mounted and rode south onto the dry scrublands of Coahuila.

From *All the Pretty Horses*, by Cormac McCarthy

---

This pretty girl, Liddy, captivated me with her ingenuous coquetry whenever I saw her. I never stayed in love with her for too long. Often I completely forgot her, but whenever I was with her, my infatuation returned. She toyed with me as she did with others, enticing me and enjoying her power, but she was only indulging the sensual curiosity of her youth. She was very pretty, but only when she spoke and moved, or laughed with her deep warm voice, or danced or was amused at the jealousy of her admirers. Whenever I returned home from a party where I had seen her, I used to laugh at myself and realize that it was impossible for a person of my nature to be seriously in love with this

pleasant, lighthearted girl. Sometimes, however, with a gesture of a friendly whispered word, she was so successful in exciting me that for half the night I would loiter with ardent feelings near the house where she lived.

I was then going through a phase of wildness and half-willed bravado. After days of depression and dullness, my youth demanded stormy emotions and excitement and I went with other companions of my own age in search of diversion. We passed for jolly, unruly, even dangerous rioters, which was untrue of me, and we enjoyed a doubtful but pleasant heroic reputation with Liddy and her small circle.

From *Gertrude*, by Hermann Hesse

---

Stubb was the second mate. He was a native of Cape Cod; and hence, according to local usage, was called a Cape-Cod man. A happy-go-lucky; neither craven nor valiant; taking perils as they came with an indifferent air; and while engaged in the most imminent crisis of the chase, toiling away, calm and collected as a journeyman joiner engaged for the year. Good-humored, easy, and careless, he presided over his whale-boat as if the most deadly encounter were but a dinner, and his crew all invited guests. He was as particular about the comfortable arrangement of his part of the boat, as an old stage-driver is about the snugness of his box. When close to the whale, in the death-lock of the fight, he handled his unpitying lance coolly and off-handedly, as a whistling tinker his hammer. He would hum over his old rigadig tunes while flank and fluke with the most exasperated monster. Long usage had, for this Stubb, converted the jaws of death into an easy-chair. What he thought of death itself, there is no telling. Whether he ever thought of it at all, might be a question...

Like his nose, his short, black little pipe was one of the regular features of his face. You would almost as soon have expected him to turn out of his bunk without his nose as without his pipe.

From *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville

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Ivan Dmitrich Gromov, a man of thirty-three, who is a gentleman by birth, and has been a court usher and provincial secretary, suffers from the mania of persecution. He either lies curled up in bed, or walks from corner to corner as though for exercise; he very rarely sits down. He is always excited, agitated, and overwrought by a sort of vague, undefined expectation. The faintest rustle in the entry or shout in the yard is enough to make him raise his head and begin listening: whether they are coming for him, whether they are looking for him. And at such times his face expresses the utmost uneasiness and repulsion. I like his broad face with its high cheek-bones, always pale and unhappy, and reflecting, as though in a mirror, a soul tormented by conflict and long-continued terror. His grimaces are strange and abnormal, but the delicate lines traced on his face by profound, genuine suffering show intelligence and sense, and there is a warm and healthy light in his eyes.

From *Ward Number 6*, by Anton Chekhov

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And more snow kept falling on top of the rest, day in, day out, drifting down softly through the moderately cold air (five to fifteen above zero), which did not freeze you to the bone – you barely noticed, it felt more like twenty or twenty-five degrees; the air was still and so dry it took the sting out. The mornings were very dark... Outside was gloomy nothing, a world packed in grayish-white cotton, in foggy vapors and whirling snow that pushed up against the windowpanes. The mountains were invisible, although over time something of the nearest evergreen forest might come into view,

heavily laden with snow, only to be quickly lost in the next fully; now and then a fir would shake off its burden, dumping dusty white into gray. Around ten o'clock the sun would appear like a wisp of softly illumined vapor above its mountain, a pale spook spreading a faint shimmer of reality over the vague, indiscernible landscape...

Yet there was a momentary hint of blue sky, and even this bit of light was enough to release a flash of diamonds across the wide landscape, so oddly disfigured by its snowy adventure. Usually the snow stopped at that hour of the day, as if for a quick survey of what had been achieved thus far; the rare days of sunshine seemed to serve much the same purpose - the flurries died down and the sun's direct glare attempted to melt the luscious, pure surface of drifted new snow. It was a fairy-tale world, child-like and funny.

From *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann

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### Markedly Distressing Passages

When we had gone two miles I stopped the horse. "Get out, Akulina," said I, "your end has come." She looked at me, she was scared; she stood up before me, she did not speak. "I am sick of you," says I, "say your prayers!" and then I snatched her by the hair; she had two thick long plaits. I twisted them round my hand and held her tight from behind my knees. I drew out my knife, I pulled her head back and slide the knife along her throat. She screamed, the blood spurted out, I threw down the knife, flung my arms around her, lay down on the ground, embraced her and screamed over her, yelling; she screamed and I screamed; she was fluttering all over, struggling to get out of my arms, and the blood was simply streaming, simply streaming on to my face and on to my hands. I left her, a panic came over me, and I left the horse and set off running, and ran home along the backs of the houses and straight to the bath-house. We had an old bath-house we didn't use: I squeezed myself into a tight corner under the steps and there sat. And there I sat till nightfall.

From *The House of the Dead*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky

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He had not a minute more to lose. He pulled the axe quite out, swung it with both arms, scarcely conscious of himself, and almost without effort, almost mechanically, brought the blunt side down on her head. He seemed not to use his own strength in this. But as soon as he had once brought the axe down, his strength returned to him.

The old woman was as always bareheaded. Her thin, light hair, streaked with grey, thickly smeared with grease, was plaited in a rat's tail and fastened by a broken horn comb which stood out on the nape of her neck. As she was so short, the blow fell on the very top of her skull. She cried out, but very faintly, and suddenly sank all of a heap on the floor, raising her hands to her head... Then he dealt her another blow with the blunt side and on the same spot. The blood gushed as if from an upturned glass, the body fell back. He stepped back, let it fall, and at once bent over her face; she was dead. Her eyes seemed to be starting out of their sockets, the brow and the whole face were drawn and contorted convulsively.

From *Crime and Punishment*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky

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Then the man came. Jeremiah tried to sidestep, failed, and received a blow on a lifted arm, then grappled and went down. As they fell, he heard a burst of shouting and saw the swirl of bodies as the

crowd closed in. From that instant, everything blurred out in the pain he felt and the fury of his own effort. Once the man's teeth closed on the flesh of his left shoulder, but he got an ear and pulled loose. Once he felt fingers stab at his left eye, missing the eye but tearing the flesh of his cheek. Once the man managed to jab a fist in his face, bringing a rush of blood from his nose. Jeremiah scarcely knew what damage he himself was doing. Then the hand was on his throat, and he felt his wind cut. He heaved and jerked, and tried to strike the man's face. The man was crowding too close, his face over Jeremiah's shoulder, his free hand clutching Jeremiah's right wrist, his legs grappling his legs. Then Jeremiah was finished. He knew he was finished.

From *World Enough and Time*, by Robert Penn Warren

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As I watched carefully, the village exploded in panic. Men tried to defend the houses which Kalmuks had already entered. More shots rang out and a man wounded in the head ran around in circles blinded by his own blood. A Kalmuk cut him down. The children scattered wildly, stumbling over ditches and fences. One of them ran into the bushes where I was hiding out, seeing but, seeing me, ran out again to be trampled by galloping horses.

The Kalmuks were now dragging a half-naked woman out of a house. She struggled and screamed, trying in vain to catch her tormentors by the legs. A group of women and girls was being rounded up with horsewhips by some laughing riders. The fathers, husbands, and brothers ran about begging for mercy, but were chased away with horsewhips and sabers. A farmer ran through the main street with his hand cut off. Blood was spurting from the stump while he kept looking for his family.

From *The Painted Bird*, by Jerry Kosinski

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As I drove home from the film studios at Shepperton on a rain-swept June evening, my car skidded at the intersection below the entrance to the Western Avenue fly-over. Within seconds I was moving at sixty miles an hour into the oncoming lane. As the car struck the central reservation the off-side tyre blew out and whirled off its rim. Out of my control, the car crossed the reservation and turned up the high-speed exit ramp. Three vehicles were approaching, mass-produced saloon cars whose exact model-year, colour schemes and external accessories I can still remember with the painful accuracy of a never-to-be-eluded nightmare. The first two I missed, pumping the brakes and barely managing to steer my car between them. The third, carrying a young woman doctor and her husband, I struck head-on. The man, a chemical engineer with an American foodstuff company, was killed instantly, propelled through his windshield like a mattress from the barrel of a circus cannon. He died on the bonnet of my car, his blood sprayed through the fractured windshield across my face and chest. The firemen who later cut me from the crushed cabin of my car assumed that I was bleeding to death from a massive open-heart wound.

From *Crash: A Novel*, by J. G. Ballard

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### **Passages that contained elements of social identity**

#### Markedly racist passages

“All these houses they’re building without maid’s quarters? It’s just plain dangerous. Everybody knows they carry different kinds of diseases than we do. I double.”

I pick up a stack a napkins. I don't know why, but all a sudden I want a hear what Miss Leefolt gone say to this. She my boss. I guess everybody wonder what they boss think a them.

"It would be nice," Miss Leefolt say, taking a little puff a her cigarette, "not having her use the one in the house. I bid three spades."

"That's exactly why I've designed the Home Help Sanitation Initiative," Miss Hilly say. "As a disease-preventative measure."

I'm surprised by how tight my throat get. It's a shame I learned to keep down a long time ago. Miss Skeeter look real confused. "The Home... the what?"

"A bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. I've even notified the surgeon general of Mississippi to see if he'll endorse the idea. I pass"

From *The Help*, by Kathryn Stockett

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Every city slaveholder is anxious to have it known of him, that he feeds his slaves well; and it is due to them to say, that most of them do give their slaves enough to eat. There are, however, some painful exceptions to this rule. Directly opposite to us, on Philpot Street, lived Mr. Thomas Hamilton. He owned two slaves. Their names were Henrietta and Mary. Henrietta was about twenty-two years of age, Mary was about fourteen; and of all the mangled and emaciated creatures I ever looked upon, these two were the most so. His heart must be harder than stone, that could look upon these unmoved. The head, neck, and shoulders of Mary were literally cut to pieces. I have frequently felt her head, and found it nearly covered with festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress. I do not know that her master ever whipped her, but I have been an eye-witness to the cruelty of Mrs. Hamilton. I used to be in Mr. Hamilton's house nearly every day. Mrs. Hamilton used to sit in a large chair in the middle of the room, with a heavy cowskin always by her side, and scarce an hour passed during the day but was marked by the blood of one of these slaves. The girls seldom passed her without her saying, "Move faster, you *black gip!*"

From *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, by Frederick Douglass

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No class, all of Each One Teach One is on the phone! They calling everybody from Mama to the mayor's office to TV stations! Before this day is up, Ms Rain say, you gonna be living somewhere, as god is my witness. As GOD is my witness! Thas when Queens shit come up. They wanna send me to 1/2way house in Queens, immediate opening. NO! What I know about Queens?! They got Arabs, Koreans, Jews, and Jamaicans-all kinda shit me and Abdul don't need to be bothered with. Here, I stay here in Harlem. Harlem house say they couldn't take me for two weeks. Ms Rain's boss git on phone. She is West Indian woman, don't take no shit. Boyfriend sit on some council. She hang up phone, say, They can take her tomorrow. So they just have to find me a place for tonight. Everyone says I can stay over their house. But you know where I stay? Ms Rain got friend who is caretaker or something at Langston Hughes' house which is not but around the corner, it's city landmark. I SPEND ONE NIGHT IN LANGSTON HUGHES' HOUSE HE USED TO LIVE IN. Me and Abdul in the Dream Keeper's house!

From *Push*, by Sapphire

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They said we wouldn't fight, that we'd turn tail and run the minute we got into real combat. They said we didn't have the discipline to make good soldiers. That we didn't have brains enough to man tanks. That we were inclined by nature to all kind of wickedness- lying, stealing, raping white women. They said we could see better than white GIs in the dark because we were closer to the beasts. When we were in Wimbourne an English gal I never laid eyes on before came up and patted me right on the butt. I asked her what she was doing and she said, "Checking to see if you've got a tail."

"Why would you think that?" I said.

She said the white GIs had been telling all the English girls that Negroes were more monkey than human.

We slept in separate barracks, ate in separate mess halls, shit in separate latrines. We even had us a separate blood supply- God forbid any wounded white boys would end up with Negro blood in their veins.

From *Mudbound*, by Hillary Jordan

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#### Microaggressive passages

I recently traveled with an African American colleague on a plane flying from New York to Boston. The plane was a small "hopper" with a single row of seats on one side and double seats on the other. As the plane was only sparsely populated, we were told by the flight attendant that we could sit anywhere, so we sat at the front, across the aisle from one another. This made it easy for us to converse and provided a larger comfortable space on a small plane for both of us. As the attendant was about to close the hatch, three White men in suits entered the plane, were informed they could sit anywhere, and promptly seated themselves in front of us. Just before takeoff, the attendant proceeded to close all overhead compartments and seemed to scan the plane with her eyes. At that point she approached us, leaned over, interrupted our conversation, and asked if we would mind moving to the back of the plane. She indicated that she needed to distribute weight on the plane evenly.

From *Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, by Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquilin

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Standing before his classroom, Charles Richardson, a White professor, asked for questions from the class. He had just finished a lecture on Greco-Roman contributions to the history of psychology. An African American male student raised his hand.

When called upon, the student spoke in a frustrated manner, noting that the history of psychology was "ethnocentric and Eurocentric" and that it left out the contributions of other societies and cultures. The student seemed to challenge the professor by noting that the contributions of African, Latin American, and Asian psychologies were never covered.

The professor responded, "Robert, I want you to calm down. We are studying American psychology in this course and we will eventually address how it has influenced and been adapted to Asian and other societies. I plan to also talk about how systems and theories of psychology contain universal applications."

Rather than defusing the situation, however, Professor Richardson sensed that his response had raised the level of tension among several students. Justin, another Black male student, then stated, “Perhaps we are looking at this issue from different perspectives or worldviews. Just as language affects how we define problems, maybe we all need to evaluate our assumptions and beliefs. Maybe we are ethnocentric. Maybe there are aspects of psychology that apply across all populations. Maybe we need to dialogue more and be open to alternative interpretations.”

Throughout the semester, the professor had sensed increasing resentment among some students over the course content (he could not understand the reasons) and he welcomed the opportunity to say something positive about their classroom contributions. He responded, “Justin, I appreciate your exceptionally thoughtful and intelligent observation. You are a most articulate young man with good conceptual and analytical skills. This is the type of nonjudgmental analysis and objectivity needed for good dialogues. We need to address these issues in a calm, unemotional, and reasoned manner.”

From *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, by Derald Wing Sue

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Kathleen, a graduating MBA business major, was conservatively dressed in her black blazer and matching skirt as she rode the number 1 subway train from Columbia University to downtown Manhattan. This would be her second job interview with a major brokerage firm and she was excited, sensing that her first interview with a midlevel manager had gone very well. She had been asked to return to be interviewed by the department vice president. Kathleen knew she was one of three finalists, but also sensed her advantage in having specialized and unique training that was of interest to the company. During the train ride, Kathleen endured the usual smattering of admiring glances, as well as a few more lecherous stares. As she exited a very crowded subway train at Times Square, she attempted to squeeze out between the streams of commuters entering the train car. One man, seeing her dilemma, firmly placed his hand on her lower back to escort her out onto the platform. With his left arm, he steered her toward the exit and they walked briskly toward the stairs, where the crowd thinned.

From *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, by Derald Wing Sue

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Letitia stood up to give her speech. Before she began, our professor asked Letitia if she would wear “those shorts” to her actual presentation on Saturday. Our professor regularly asks all of the students such questions to clarify appropriate attire for public speaking. Our professor went on to say that what you wear and how you present yourself make a statement. She noted that if you were to wear jean shorts to your thesis presentation, that is a statement. Her focus on attire was a means of noting the importance of professionalism in certain public speaking situations.

Our professor acknowledged the discomfort of speaking overtly about attire and perception, especially for women, and encouraged us to share our thoughts and opinions. Students began discussing their beliefs on the matter. Letitia became visibly upset by our professor’s earlier comments, and after one international student’s comment, she left the room. From the initial comments to Letitia’s exit, only a few minutes had passed, and many people were speaking at

once. Tensions were high, and neither our professor nor Letitia was able to adequately defend her position.

From a written letter by students in an *Acting in Public* class at Cornell University

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My teacher is Asian. I've never specifically asked him, but his last name makes me think he is Chinese. I really respect his courage and tenacity to come to the US and to teach at a university, but his English is very limited and his pronunciation is not very good. Because of this, it is incredibly difficult to understand him in class. Sometimes I leave class feeling exhausted- almost like trying to learn something while listening to it in another language- because it is so hard to decipher what he is saying. I believe other students are frustrated as well and that it is probably why they mutter things in class, but lately, the muttering and talking behind his back has gotten worse. Recently, students have been asking questions really loudly and then laughing at the professor when he repeats the question back to clarify it. A friend who sits next to me often says things like, "he just said that?" in an angry tone when the teacher repeats a question. In the last week or two, people have started speaking loudly to each other in class while he is talking. Many times, he asks us for the answer and will write it down even though it is sometimes incorrect. Then, if someone goes back to correct him and tells him the answer is wrong, he will fix it, no questions asked. The other day, my friend snorted and said, "he doesn't even know the answers?"

From *Microaggressions at the University of Mississippi: A report from the UM Race Diary Project*, by Kirk A. Johnson, Willa M. Johnson, James M. Thomas, and John J. Green

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Last week I was driving in Oxford when all of the sudden lights started flashing and going off in my car and the left side of my car felt unusually close to the ground. I luckily made it to my apartment complex and pulled into a parking spot beside where some landscapers were removing trees. I got out of my car and noticed my left front tire was completely flat. I had somewhere to be in an hour so I decided rather than trying to call someone to change my tire I would just do it myself. My dad had shown me how to change my tire a few years ago when the same thing happened because he said, "It's always a good thing to know how to do, in case of an emergency." So, I proceeded to change my tire when one of the male workers walked up to me and said, "Ma'am, do you need help?" I appreciated his generosity but I knew what I was doing, so I said, "No sir, I've got it, thank you though!" After I politely declined, he continued to offer his assistance. "Ma'am, I can help if you want, I really don't mind," he said. He went on to tell me how surprised he was that "a girl like me could do a job like this." He said it was "nice to see a woman that could handle herself."

From *Microaggressions at the University of Mississippi: A report from the UM Race Diary Project*, by Kirk A. Johnson, Willa M. Johnson, James M. Thomas, and John J. Green

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My first summer in New York, trying to get in the door as a magazine writer felt like trying to get deaf people to notice you in a pitch-black room. But I was socially aggressive and slowly made a few contacts that eventually mushroomed into more. There were already many great Black music writers in New York but most of them wanted to write from hiphop-centric magazines. I chased bylines in older publications that were not focused on hiphop because I saw

myself as building a career. Plus, I loved and understood hip-hop culture and wanted to write about it in a more complex and accurate way than the vast majority of the white music writers in town were doing. When I pitched editors they respected my vision of hip-hop and I think some felt that having a twenty-something Black man interview rappers and write about hip-hop could have advantages over using thirty-something white guys who didn't seem to have the same tight grasp of the culture that I had. One day, at a magazine where I was doing a lot of work, I was talking to an editor, campaigning for a contract, trying to get him to see that I deserved one. He leaned back and breathed in deep, then calmly said, "I know you can write about Run-D.M.C., but can you write about Eric Clapton?"

From *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What It Means To Be Black Now*, by Touré

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