

Context for Enhancing Learning about Trauma and Oppression

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Additional information on our websites

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Learning from courses we have taught at the University of Oregon

- Undergraduate (added to curriculum by Freyd & taught by Freyd and Becker-Blease)
 - Psychology of Gender** (Psy 380): general education course; multi-cultural credit; no prerequisites; about 65 students
 - Psychology of Trauma** (Psy 472): for psychology majors; core course credit; stats and research methods prerequisites; about 65 students
- Graduate seminars (taught by Freyd; Becker-Blease attended)
 - Many seminars on trauma offered over last 12 years: E.g.: trauma and sexuality; developmental traumatology; trauma and cognitive science

Course information: <http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/~jfreyd/>

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Teaching about trauma and oppression: Opportunity and challenge

- Courses addressing gender, oppression, trauma, and/or violence may inspire students to make powerful emotional connections with the intellectual material.
- Students with injuries due to oppression and/or trauma-related disabilities (e.g. PTSD) may be drawn to these courses.
- Connections include reminders of personal suffering from oppression or abuse and discovery of the suffering of others.
- Emotional connection with academic content comes with both risk of distress and the potential to enrich learning and intellectual development.

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Two different challenging reactions

- Some students may become distressed and unglued.
- Other students may react with denial and tightening up, even hostility.
 - This can be a defensive reaction
 - Special problem of perpetrators in the classroom

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Culture of silence: Victims

- The classroom reality is situated in a larger culture of silence regarding explicit discussion of personal victimization.
- Indeed, students may experience a class on oppression or trauma as the first time they have permission to speak about these important matters.
- The culture of silence may relate to the pervasive belief that permitting trauma victims to discuss their experiences will cause psychological harm.
- This belief manifests in restrictions on research and an avoidance of the topic in almost all contexts including graduate training.

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Culture of silence: Perpetrators

- As uncomfortable as we are about hearing from victims, we are even more uncomfortable with perpetrators.
- A class on gender, trauma or oppression may, for the first time, open the eyes of perpetrators to the impacts of previous actions.
- Or, friends of perpetrators may for the first time recognize the seriousness of someone else's behavior.
- Opportunity to provide resources for perpetrators to seek help and change behavior.

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What do we know from asking about abuse in research context

- Analysis of issues in research context:
Becker Blease, K.A. & Freyd, J.J. (invited revision under review). Research participants telling the truth about their lives: the ethics of asking and not asking about abuse. *American Psychologist*.

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Some benefits of asking about abuse in research (from Becker-Bleuse & Freyd)

- Benefits to science/humanity
 - Reduce costs related to outcomes of abuse
 - Improve well-being
- Benefits to participant population
 - Prevent others from being abused
 - Assist those who have been abused
 - End stigma
- Benefits to actual participants
 - Provide information and support to research participants who disclose abuse

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Similarly, some benefits to students learning about trauma and oppression

- Abuse and trauma highly associated with many important psychological issues
- Benefits to science/humanity from informed students
 - Reduce costs related to outcomes of abuse
 - Improve well-being of abused and oppressed
 - Prevent others from being abused
 - Assist those who have been abused
 - End stigma
 - Provide information and support to individuals participants who disclose abuse

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Risks of asking about abuse (from Becker-Bleuse & Freyd)

- Sometimes, although rarely, participants may become upset by research on abuse.
- Researchers and IRBs should focus on ways to conduct research that reduces that risk.
- Researchers and IRBs should focus on response plans when asking participants to disclose abuse.

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Similarly, risks of teaching about trauma and oppression

- Sometimes students may become upset by research on abuse.
- Teachers should focus on ways to structure the class that reduces that risk without sacrificing intellectual and academic integrity and content.
- Teachers should have response plans when students disclose abuse and/or become upset.

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From Becker-Blease and Freyd -- There are costs to NOT asking about abuse

- Science loses information.
 - When statistical models fail to include abuse, variance attributed to other predictors is inflated.
- Society loses information necessary for social services, public policy and therapy.
- Survivors lose: a "don't ask, don't tell" policy reinforces feelings of shame.

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Similarly, there are costs to NOT teaching about trauma and oppression

- Students lose information, e.g.
 - Many people are victims of trauma and oppression
 - Many psychological phenomena are empirically related to trauma and oppression
- Society then loses information necessary for social services, public policy and therapy.
- Survivors also lose: a "don't ask, don't tell" policy reinforces feelings of shame.

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In summary: What can we learn from asking about abuse in research

- Research indicates that while talking about trauma and abuse is not generally harmful per se (and can be beneficial), social context and particularly response to disclosures of trauma and abuse can be either deeply helpful or deeply harmful.
- We must therefore attend to context and response in both research and teaching.

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Practical solutions: Some starting questions

- What social contexts and responses to disclosures of abuse are likely to be beneficial in the classroom, laboratory, on-line discussion, and faculty office?
- What is a teacher to do when students spontaneously disclose abuse?
- What can be done in advance to reduce the likelihood of harmful outcome?
- How can a teacher manage for her/himself as well as the students the emotional reality of oppression and trauma, while enhancing the intellectual and academic experience?

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Classroom problems and solutions: Lack of prior opportunities to process trauma

- Part of the problem is that many students have a pent-up need to address prior trauma in their lives and this need may get unleashed in a class on trauma.
- So lack of resources and societal permission to discuss these issues in other contexts essentially burdens the teacher with this unmet need.
- Partial solution: research resources in the community and provide that information to the students in the syllabus (and remind them a few times).

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Classroom problems and solutions: Unanticipated emotional reaction

- Students often do not anticipate how personally and emotionally they will react to the material in the class.
- Solution: informed consent
 - Inform them in the syllabus and in class of possible reactions (but try not to create negative expectancy).
 - Remind them periodically of both possible negative reactions and resources for dealing with them.
 - At the same time, demonstrate high expectations for their ability to function and thus bring out the best in them.
 - Always treat students with respect (including respect for their strengths).
 - If students discover too late to officially withdraw that they are overwhelmed with emotional need, consider giving them an incomplete until they are ready to handle course work.

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Classroom problems and solutions: Disclosures of abuse and trauma

- Students may want to disclose their own personal history in class or in on-line discussion.
- This may have a bad outcome:
 - Class discussion/academic focus may get neglected.
 - Response to disclosure by classmates may be problematic.
- Solution:
 - Warn students at the beginning of course and throughout of these risks.
 - Teach students as part of course content about disclosure and response to disclosure (including what we know about responses that are helpful).
 - Model good responses to disclosures if they occur.

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Example warning from Freyd's syllabus, "A special note about the nature of discussions in this class"

"In this class we will be discussing issues which may have, at times, an intense personal significance for some members of the class. There are no taboos for discussion topics in this course. We will exercise and respect freedom of speech. At the same time, we must take responsibility to ensure that we are respectful of everyone's opinion and that we stay on topic. We will be focusing especially on critical thinking and the use of empirical data to evaluate theories about gender. If you find you are troubled by material while taking this course, and need support or counseling, please be sure to pursue that external support by seeking out a supportive friend, counselor, and/or a social service."

[Followed by list of community hot lines and resources]

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Classroom problems and solutions: Instructor fatigue

- The instructor and teaching assistants are at risk of fatigue from the emotional reaction of students.
- Solutions:
 - Set boundaries with students; do not assume role of therapist but do compassionately refer student to supportive resources.
 - Set up social support with colleagues.

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Classroom problems and solutions: Hostility in the classroom

- Teaching gender or trauma can inspire a certain amount of hostility from some students.
- This can come from many different types of students and for many different reasons.
- It is particularly challenging when it is reaction of an oppressor or a perpetrator.
- Solution: The instructor must acknowledge this can happen, retain authority at all times (do not tolerate misbehavior), and if necessary seek help to keep the classroom and instructor safe.

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Classroom problems and solutions: Student despair

- Teaching about injustice and cruelty related to gender or trauma can cause students to despair.
- Too much despair can be paralyzing.
- Solutions:
 - Teach students about those who have overcome cruelty and have made the world more just.
 - Give students a final term project that is focused on positive change.

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It is difficult, but it can all be worth it

- Despite the challenges, students generally respond very well to courses in trauma and oppression.
- Course and instructor evaluations in our courses on gender and trauma have been very positive.

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In conclusion, words of students . . .

This course should be a core requirement of all psychology students. This course has been life changing in a very positive way.

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Words of students . . .

This information will affect me later in life because my goal is to become a clinical child psychologist.

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Words of students . . .

This class has been the highlight of my term, which sounds strange considering that the subject matter can be so bleak. I feel that the topic of trauma can certainly can be seen as depressing, bit I also see it as a sign of hope (for the possibility of change).

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Words of students . . .

I know that trauma can be heartbreakingly difficult to study at times, but the benefits far outweigh the negative.

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Words of students . . .

Stories of women in abusive relationships used to be something that really angered me. I honestly can say that I had more negative feelings directed at women in these situations than at their abusive partners. I always thought, "Why don't they just leave? People treat you the way that you let them!" I now understand that in some cases they were surviving the best way they knew how, and that is something to admire. ... I also feel a need to make sure blame is properly placed.

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Words of students . . .

Because of this class, my life will never be the same again. ... I have discussed this class with many people, students, co-workers, family and friends. They can all see the excitement emanating from my every cell. When they ask me what it is about this class that has touched me so deeply, I can only say: it makes me feel alive.

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Words of students . . .

I have never felt so much in such a little amount of time. Of course, much of the feelings I felt were of pain, disgust, horror, and even hatred, the rot of these emotions if from someone else's trauma. I feel anguish for all the trauma survivors in the world! This class not only taught me how to approach the subject of trauma, it showed me how to care for these who have suffered (victim and perpetrator). Because of this course, I have a better understanding of people, and of myself.