# ‘Touching a nerve’: studying sensitive topics in psychology

Julie Hulme explains why it is useful to study sensitive topics and how to cope if you find doing so difficult

Psychology involves learning about every aspect of human life. From birth to death, psychology explores what it means to be human, looking at our development, how we interact in our social world, how we think, what makes us all different, and how biology underpins human behaviour. This makes it an unusual subject; no other academic discipline asks us to think about ourselves in so much detail.

Some of the topics we encounter in the psychology curriculum, as a result, deal with painful life experiences. For example, during your course, you are likely to learn about mental health, including topics such as depression, eating disorders and schizophrenia. These are not the only sensitive topics though. Studying gender can be challenging, as some students might be coming to terms with their own sexuality or transgender identity. The study of infant attachment is also thought to be sensitive because research in this area predicts that insecure infant attachment relationships might lead to more problematic adult relationships. This can be understandably worrying for students who have difficult family relationships, who were adopted, or who are living separately from their parents.

Almost any psychology topic could be sensitive if it relates to a student’s life. For example, studying memory might seem relatively safe, until someone in the class visits a grandparent with dementia, and the grandparent fails to recognise them. Sensitive topics are not always predictable; they become sensitive only because of an individual’s reaction to them. Therefore ‘sensitive topics’ means any psychological content which can cause upset or distress, because it touches on personal subjects that students, or people they know, may have experienced.

## <B>Who experiences sensitive topics?

Adolescence is a time when our brains are completing their development, both biologically and cognitively. We are developing our own social identity and learning about our own sexuality. At the same time, we can sometimes be stressed by pressure to do well in exams and make decisions about our futures. As a result, the late teens and early twenties are difficult times for lots of people!

Many mental health challenges are first experienced during the late teens and early twenties, with the majority of clinical diagnoses being made between the ages of 14-24 years (Kessler *et al.* 2005). In universities, more students studying psychology report psychological illness than is average for university students. This might be because psychology students are more aware of psychological issues and feel safer disclosing their condition or, according to Craig and Zinckiewicz (2010) ‘*Some students may actually seek to study psychology to learn more about their impairment and in some cases this will help them cope with it better’* (p25). If this is true, students may choose to study psychology at A level to help them to understand their own mental health, and there may be other students in your class who, maybe completely unknown to you, are facing psychological difficulties every day.

## <B>Reasons to study sensitive topics

Together with Helen Kitching and, more recently, Sabrina Mall, I have been researching teachers’ experiences of socially sensitive topics in their classrooms. If studying sensitive topics in psychology can be upsetting, you might be wondering why you should bother but there are some important benefits gained from learning about them.

**<C>Sensitive topics are engaging**

Sensitive topics are interesting! Learning about something that you can relate to in real life makes the subject come to life and makes the content more engaging. Sharing personal experiences of sensitive topics in the classroom can sometimes help us to understand academic concepts in a more ‘real’ way. For example, one A level teacher described what happened during a class on prejudice:

‘*A year 13 lad had a real outburst when we were studying prejudice. He was visibly upset as a redhead he had suffered so much verbal and some physical abuse from strangers in the street and he talked with raw emotion, tears in his eyes at the time. He was tall, strong looking lad, not a wimp but many people had taken his hair colour to be permission to act so nastily.’*

Hearing people’s stories in this way can help you to understand the personal relevance of psychology, which can make psychological theories easier to understand, and more interesting to learn about.

**<C>Understanding diversity and different perspectives**

Another benefit from studying sensitive topics is that we become more aware of diversity, and of other people’s lives and emotions. This is important when our friends and family may be experiencing difficulties and also, when you move on to university or into the world of work, you will encounter people who come from different backgrounds or who are facing daily challenges in their lives. Understanding that people have different perspectives from us can help us to empathise with them, and to build better relationships between different social groups.

This is an important aspect of ‘psychological literacy’, a concept that means that we can apply our psychological knowledge and skills to solve everyday problems, which helps to make us more employable and to build better communities. As American psychologist, Diane Halpern, who is famous for her work on psychological literacy, says:

*‘Today’s students must prepare themselves for a world in which knowledge is accumulating at a rapidly accelerating rate and in which old problems such as poverty, racism, and pollution join new problems such as global terrorism, a health crisis created by alarming increases in obesity, and the growing gap between the poor and the very rich. All of these problems require psychological skills, knowledge and values for their solution.’* (Halpern 2010, p162).

Studying sensitive topics, then, can help us to live alongside and work with people who are different to ourselves, and understanding issues relating to mental health, human development, sexuality and social influences can help to combat prejudice and stigma. We can use our understanding of psychology to solve modern-day problems that affect us all.

## <B>Talking about sensitive topics

Whilst we can see that there are potential benefits to studying sensitive topics, learning about them can present some risks and challenges, particularly around disclosures. For example, one A level psychology teacher told us about a student who found learning about psychopathology difficult:

‘*When I was teaching psychopathology to the student whose mom committed suicide and we discussed the issue of depression and suicide in the classroom she came and spoke to me at the end of the lesson and told me what had happened to her mother.’*

In this case, the teacher was able to work with the student to help them to cope with learning about this extremely sensitive topic, and to allow her to leave the room if the class became too distressing.

Sometimes, as well as talking to the teacher after class, some students choose to disclose their experiences in class. We were told about students telling their class what it was like to suffer from depression, talking about bullying and prejudice, coming out as gay for the first time, and talking about treatment for eating disorders. Most teachers told us that that classmates tended to be empathetic and supportive, but revealing these sorts of issues in class is risky, as once you have disclosed something so personal, it cannot be taken back if people do not respond as you might have hoped. There is also a risk that you might trigger an emotional reaction in a troubled classmate, and teachers themselves sometimes find these sorts of class disclosures stressful, because they are worried about how to protect you if things don’t go well.

Learning about a subject that ‘touches a nerve’ can (of course) bring a lot of emotions to the surface, meaning that you might feel the need to talk to someone about your experiences, either to their teacher, or, if you feel safe to do so, with your peers. This is quite normal, but does need some careful thought, both for your own wellbeing, and for your peers and your teacher.

## <B>Advice for studying sensitive topics

If you are studying psychology, but you are worried that something from your own life experience might prove sensitive, there are a few things that you can do to help yourself through the situation.

**<C>Think ahead**

Look at the specification you are going to be studying, and look to see if the topic you are concerned about is listed. If it is, consider going to have a chat with your teacher in advance. If your teacher is aware that the topic is sensitive for you, they might be able to change what or how they teach to make things easier for you. Some of our teachers taught the class a different optional topic, if they were given enough notice. Some agreed that a student could leave the room if they were becoming worried about the lesson, and then provided notes and one-to-one tuition after class to help the student to catch up. Your teacher might also refer you for some extra support, outside of class, so that you feel better able to cope when the subject comes up.

**<C>Speak to your teacher**

If you are in class when you feel that a topic is becoming sensitive, try to speak to your teacher privately during a break or at the end of the class. Talking about any problems you are experiencing can be a good thing, as it means that you can get some help. Psychology teachers, however, are rarely qualified to provide counselling or clinical help themselves, so, although they are likely to empathise and be supportive about your academic work, they may also need to refer you to someone for more psychological help, such as your student support or counselling centre.

**<C>Consider sharing your experiences**

If you want to share your own experiences in class, bear in mind that the emotions you are feeling at that time may have been stirred up by the lesson, and they are likely to fade again. Think carefully about whether you are ready to take the risk of disclosing to everyone. If you still think it is a good idea, speak to your teacher first, in private, to check that they are comfortable with you doing so. Helping your teacher to know what to expect will be appreciated, as they can then prepare to work with the class appropriately, and they will be less stressed themselves. Your teacher may also be aware of other students who are struggling with similar issues, and will be able to take make sure that your disclosure is safe for everyone.

If you don’t feel comfortable talking to your psychology teacher, think about other sources of help and support in your school or college. You might have a counselling service you can visit, or a personal tutor who can provide some support. Alternatively, is there another teacher you find approachable who can give you some advice? We all experience difficulties at times, and psychological problems can be helped; speaking to someone is often the first step to getting that help.

## <B>Conclusions

Psychology is a fascinating subject, in part because it gives us insight into every aspect of human experience. Sometimes, though, we can find ourselves studying a topic that feels very personal, which can be challenging and upsetting. There are some important benefits to studying sensitive topics, because they are interesting, they help us to understand other people, and they help us to develop our psychological literacy, employability, and citizenship skills. If a topic in psychology is causing you difficulty, it is important to seek help, and if possible, talk to your teacher privately to ensure that you are supported during class. Hopefully, then, you can enjoy studying what it means to be human, even when sometimes psychology ‘touches a nerve’.

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