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The nature of psychology: Reflections on university teachers' experiences of teaching sensitive topics

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Julie A. Hulme
Keele University

Helen J. Kitching
Gildredge House School

Corresponding author:

Dr Julie A. Hulme
School of Psychology
Keele University
Keele
Staffordshire
ST5 5BG

Email: j.a.hulme@keele.ac.uk

Tel: (01782) 733325

Teaching sensitive topics in psychology: reflections on university teachers' experiences

Abstract

This paper describes one aspect of a larger scale qualitative study conducted to investigate psychology-specific issues in learning and teaching in higher education.

Participants included academic psychologists from across the career spectrum and from diverse UK universities. A semi-structured focus group methodology was employed, and results were analysed using thematic analysis.

A key theme related to the nature of psychology, with a subtheme of teaching sensitive topics. For our purposes, we define 'sensitive topics' as topics within the psychology curriculum that may elicit an emotional or distressing response amongst learners. Psychology engages students in academic study and assessment that is relevant to their own personal circumstances or that they can find upsetting. Participants noted particular challenges when teaching sensitive topics, but also observed the value of doing so for students and society more widely.

We explore the perceptions of university teachers with regard to teaching sensitive topics in psychology, reflect on the implications within higher education, and by extrapolation, within pre-tertiary education. We close with recommendations for curriculum developers and educators within both sectors.

Key words: sensitive topics, mental health, psychological literacy, employability, higher education, pre-tertiary education

Introduction

Psychology is an unusual discipline, drawing on natural sciences, social sciences and philosophy (Quality Assurance Agency, 2016). It encompasses all aspects of what it is to be human, covering biology and neuropsychology, social interaction and cultural context, cognitive processing, development from pre-birth to death, all of the things that humans share in common, and all of the ways in which we are diverse. As such, it touches on the life experiences of each and every one of us, and at the same time requires us to study those experiences within an academic context.

Indeed, the relevance of psychology to human life is part of its appeal as an academic discipline. Trapp, Banister, Ellis, Latto, Miell and Upton (2011) emphasised the value of studying psychology in terms of developing graduate employability, critical thinking, global citizenship and ethics, describing psychology as a 'STEM+' (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics 'plus') subject which delivers all of the attributes of a science education, such as numeracy and research, along with the skills more traditionally associated with a social science or humanities education, such as extended writing and interpersonal skills. Globally, there is an increasing focus on the concept of psychological literacy, which refers to the skills and knowledge acquired from the study of psychology, which can be applied to solving problems in everyday life (Halpern, 2010; Cranney & Dunn, 2011; Hulme, 2014). The

interdisciplinary nature of psychology, both within the bounds of the discipline itself, and across its boundaries into disciplines such as sociology, biology and health, ensure the delivery of a broad skills base. Understanding human behaviour, through the knowledge acquired during a psychology education, adds an extra dimension to those skills, potentially equipping psychology graduates to make a real difference to the world around them (for an example, see Harré, 2011, who espouses the application of psychology to promote sustainability). This attracts students to study psychology; Bromnick and Horowitz (2013) surveyed psychology students at the university of Lincoln, and found that helping others was the most popular reason given for choosing to study psychology. Open questions used within their study revealed that students were strongly motivated by a desire to 'make a difference'.

Students may also be motivated to study psychology by a desire to understand their own life experiences. According to Craig and Zinkiewicz (2010), the proportions of higher education students with declared disabilities, particularly those with mental ill health and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, are higher in psychology than in any other discipline. There are two possible explanations for this. Firstly, students may feel more comfortable and less stigmatised disclosing a disability when applying for a psychology programme, or, secondly, students with disabilities may be choosing to study psychology in greater numbers than choose other subjects. Craig and Zinkiewicz suggest that a combination of these two factors is likely and quote a number of students who suggest that they chose psychology directly to understand their own condition. For example: *"Some students may actually seek to study psychology to learn more about their impairment and some cases this will help them cope with it better"* (p25). Similarly, they quote a psychology academic: *"Psychology attracts more students with mental health problems than other disciplines. Students think this will help but in fact they tend to feel worse"* (p26).

This personal experience can be a mixed blessing and curse. One student found developing a psychological understanding of her condition helpful: *"I have learned the biological basis to epilepsy, meaning that I understand my condition more, which has been both interesting and informative"* (p26). In contrast, this student with mental health difficulties found that studying psychology exacerbated their problems: *"Some subjects, like the study of repressed memories and social psychology, have made me feel more depressed and made me focus on my own problems and made me feel more hopeless and helpless"* (p27). Tutors may need to be conscious of these competing outcomes in their dealings with diverse students.

If psychology is unusual, and its students are diverse, then teaching and learning within psychology must be appropriately designed and delivered to take into account these disciplinary contexts. The importance of discipline-specific pedagogic research is not a new concept; Becher and Trowler (2001) published the first edition of their seminal 'Academic Tribes and Territories' book in 1989, exploring the cultural dimensions of different disciplines, and conceptualising learning within a discipline as a process of becoming enculturated. Considerable research has been devoted since to identifying the implications of disciplinary contexts for learning and teaching (e.g. Neumann, 2001; Kreber, 2009).

In 2015, in an attempt to find out more about disciplinary contexts in which learning and teaching occurs, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) commissioned research

from 23 professional and subject-related bodies, including the British Psychological Society (BPS), to identify discipline-specific learning and teaching issues within higher education in the UK (Bulman, 2015; Hulme & Kitching, 2016). The project addressed a wide variety of topics across the twenty-three different disciplines, including resources, challenges, anticipated changes within the discipline, support available, and within the psychology project, specific issues relating to the UK nation in which teaching was delivered. A semi-structured focus group design was intended to give those teaching within the discipline a voice, and an opportunity to raise issues that they faced during their day-to-day employment. Focus groups allow richer data to be collected than would be the case for interview methods, because participants are able to explore their shared experiences and any differences between them, giving the researcher insight into the contexts in which different participants are working.

As the project seeks to gain direct insight into the experiences of higher education teachers, and is not theoretically grounded, inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen as an appropriate method of analysis. In this paper, we will describe our findings relating to one of the themes that we identified, relating to the nature of psychology. Discussions around this theme included participants' reflecting on their experiences of teaching sensitive topics, and this article will explore these findings. Subsequently we will explore implications for individuals and organisations working within both the higher education and pre-tertiary sectors.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited from a mixture of 'old' (pre-1992) and 'new' (post-1992) universities, including postgraduates who teach, lecturers at a variety of career stages, and professors. Given the diverse job titles and roles of our participants, throughout this paper, we refer to them as 'teachers', since teaching is what they all have in common. Participation was invited via email contact with individuals at universities in each of the four UK nations, who were asked to recruit colleagues with an interest in learning and teaching.

Participants were required to be teaching psychology within a higher education institution, and, at the request of the HEA, ideally should be members of the BPS (although this was not true in all cases).

Twenty-four participants took part in a series of four focus groups, one in each of England (London), Scotland (Edinburgh), Wales (Wrexham) and Northern Ireland (Belfast), each hosted by a participating university. All focus groups were held in the summer or autumn of 2015. Further information about participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Composition of focus groups

Location	Number of attendees	Comments
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London, ENGLAND	5	Staff from a range of career stages. All from “new” universities (3 institutions).
Wrexham, WALES	4	Staff from a range of career stages, teaching focused and traditional academic. One post-92 and one “old” university.
Edinburgh, SCOTLAND	6	Staff from a range of career stages, teaching focused and traditional academic. Combination of “old” and “new” universities.
Belfast, NORTHERN IRELAND	9	Staff from a range of career stages, traditional academics and postgraduates from an “old” university.

Materials

Participants were sent information about the study, including the questions to be used in the focus groups, in advance, by email, to encourage reflection and stimulate discussion during the focus groups themselves. The questions were provided by the HEA, in order to facilitate comparability across a range of disciplines, and covered a range of topics intended to elicit discussion about participants’ experiences of teaching, with a specific focus on psychology-specific issues. The questions were as follows:

1. What are the key resources you use in your teaching?
2. What are the learning and teaching challenges you face in your subject area/discipline?
3. How do you think the teaching in your subject area is likely to evolve over the next few years?
4. a) What gaps can you identify in the current coverage of teaching and learning resources for your subject discipline?
b) How might your professional body or the HEA address the identified gaps?
5. Thinking back to question 2, what gaps might emerge in the near future given the projected evolution of teaching and learning in your subject?
6. Can you think of any other ways in which your professional body or the HEA could support and advance learning and teaching in your subject-based practice?

Participants were asked to prepare a list of responses for Question 1, which were submitted to the focus group moderators at the start of the discussions, and discussed relatively minimally to allow more detailed focus on the latter questions.

Design

The focus groups followed a semi-structured format, using the key questions provided by the HEA as a basis to stimulate discussion. Participants were given freedom in their interpretation of the questions, and the time spent discussing each question was flexible, depending on the level of interest of participants. Where

necessary, the moderator asked additional questions to further stimulate discussion, to encourage participation from quieter group members, or to obtain clarity or further detail with regard to an individual response.

Procedure

Focus groups were hosted within a university meeting room, at a university close to where participants lived or worked. Refreshments were provided, and participants were given time to get to know each other and the research team informally before the focus group discussions commenced.

Following refreshments, participants were seated around a table, and asked to read information about the study, and to provide written consent to their participation. They were also invited to ask questions at this stage. Participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the study, and the procedures that they should follow should they wish to do this. With the consent of participants, an audio recorder was used to record subsequent discussions.

The focus groups were moderated by an experienced university academic psychologist (JH), supported by a pre-tertiary psychology teacher (HK), who also took notes. The moderator led the group through the questions, facilitating discussion and asking further questions as required.

Discussions lasted for between 60-90 minutes, following which participants were provided with debriefing information, given opportunities to ask further questions, and encouraged to remain for refreshments and informal discussion if they wished to do so.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were anonymously transcribed (verbatim), and checked by both researchers against the contemporaneous notes taken by HK.

The data were then subject to inductive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly data were coded, and further analysed to identify themes within the data. Initial coding and analyses were conducted by JH, who reviewed, refined and named them. Coding and themes were then checked by HK; a high level of consensus was found, suggesting a valid and reliable analysis.

Results

In total, seven separate themes were identified within the data, as follows:

- Marketisation of HE and its impact on psychology education
- Teaching methods and innovative pedagogies
- Technology-enhanced learning
- Assessment, skills and knowledge
- Professionalisation, teaching and research
- Diversity of students and transition
- Nature of psychology.

For the purposes of this article, we intend to focus solely on the latter theme, relating to the nature of psychology. Further information on the other six themes can be discovered in Hulme and Kitching's (2016) report, which is freely available online.

Discussions relating to the nature of psychology took place in all four of the focus groups. Subthemes included:

- 1) the psychology curriculum;
- 2) the evolving nature of psychology;
- 3) sensitive topics in psychology.

When discussing the psychology curriculum, participants explored issues to do with the diversity of content and theoretical perspectives within psychology, and what this meant for psychology in terms of its identification as a 'science' discipline. Participants were interested in the ways in which students engage with the empirical foundations of psychology, including issues surrounding teaching students about both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Within the second subtheme, it was noted that psychology is evolving in three different directions; its nature is changing. Firstly, there is an increased focus on neuroscience, in part perceived to be influenced by the Research Excellence Framework (REF), as psychology departments were perceived to be recruiting staff who obtained large grants and published in high impact-factor journals, leading to preferential recruitment of neuroscience specialists. Secondly, there is a shift in thinking around statistics, including issues to do with hypothesis testing, replicability and big data. Finally, participants explored a perception that psychology is becoming more applied in its focus, with students seeking more community engagement and opportunities to apply psychology, within the framework of their degree studies:

"The way forward is to be looking out of the gate and getting people into the community."

"Engagement with communities, organisations and business has to be a way forward. How Psychology does that is an interesting one...in mainstream psychology, how do we develop what we are terming civic engagement?"

This desire to apply psychology to community activity was linked by some participants to an aspiration to supporting their students' development in terms of employability and citizenship. Engaging with external organisations was seen as a way of promoting problem-solving skills and professional behaviour within students, and of simultaneously raising awareness of issues such as diversity and poverty within communities, which would both relate to psychological learning and also facilitate citizenship behaviours.

Teaching in this way enabled teachers to integrate content from different sub-disciplines, facilitating students' thinking about psychology in a way that allowed them to see different perspectives as complementary, rather than conflicting, and this was perceived as highly beneficial in giving students a holistic insight into the discipline.

“I said it is the most applied module you could have because it covers everything. It brings in health, social, cognitive, all of that.”

Importantly, teaching in the context of community issues was associated by participants with a more specific aspect of relating psychological content to everyday life.

Discussions of the importance of teaching psychology with a focus on its application to everyday life led in turn to the third subtheme, as teachers gave diverse accounts of their experiences of teaching what they termed ‘sensitive topics’, including eating disorders, addictions, sexuality, depression, anxiety, ageing and death. The topics named by different teachers varied, often depending on their particular specialism within psychology, but it was generally agreed that some topics were likely to provoke emotional reactions in students, sometimes because those students had experienced the issue being taught (and may even have chosen to study psychology because of that) or because they were close to someone else who had.

“Sometimes students come in because they have had a breakdown, and they have received fantastic help from a clinical psychologist, and therefore that is what I want to do.”

“Your students might have suffered something...if you are talking about transgender, LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] rights, you cannot assume your students don’t know somebody or haven’t gone through it...I have a transgender student I never knew I had...you talk about alcoholism and you talk about the genetic influence, and then there is somebody whose father is an alcoholic, and they think ‘Oh, does it mean I’m going to become an alcoholic?’ and you have to be aware when that question is going to come, and how do you respond to it accurately without making them feel worse.”

It was also recognised that sensitive topics were not always obvious, and that sometimes a teacher could be teaching a topic (such as attachment) that they had not previously experienced as sensitive, but may receive a surprising response from a student that then made them think differently about the topic. The fact that the topics were thought-provoking for both tutors and students was seen as significant, though, given that issues such as mental ill health are prevalent in the work place and in everyday life, and it was felt to be important to raise awareness in order to be able to deal with such issues wherever they arose in everyday life beyond the classroom.

The potential for psychology to relate so closely to students’ lives and experiences was thought to make the subject interesting and relevant, and as a result made it extremely engaging for students, as they became emotionally involved in the learning experience:

“I would argue that it should be powerful, and that it is either powerful because it is fun and entertaining and they are really engaged and enjoying it, or it is powerful because it is so emotive.”

However, this created a challenge for teachers, particularly those working within institutions where the rhetoric around learning and teaching was that it should be “fun”, and where a sense of risk-aversion could mean that “upsetting” students was something to be avoided. Another participant summarised this tension, noting that the nature of psychology means that sometimes a sad emotional response might be more appropriate than maintaining an upbeat atmosphere:

“One of the arguments we had when we were doing some PGCE [Post-Graduate Certificate in Education] training was that teaching should be fun...if you are talking about death and dying, or psychopathology or something, you don't want people laughing... You don't make it fun, and you do make them cry, and that is when you know you have done well.”

Participants recognised that provoking such emotional responses, however, conferred responsibility upon them to support the students subsequently. Many participants recounted their experiences of students coming to them after lectures to seek help, and there was some agreement that students seemed to expect psychology tutors to have appropriate experience and expertise to help them. This sometimes left tutors feeling out of their depth, because most were not clinically trained:

“If they were doing Computer Science, and their computer went down at home, they would come in...Psychology is particularly problematic because of the emotional element and the psychological element.”

This sense of conflict, with teachers recognising a need to teach sensitive topics, whilst also managing disclosures appropriately and supportively, was not only challenging for the affected students. Tutors may be emotionally affected by student disclosures, and few felt that they had been adequately trained to deal with serious issues, or that they had anywhere to turn for support themselves:

“When we touch on PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], we will have students come to our offices afterwards...and tell us their life story – I had four of my students come in...One was pregnant and didn't want to be, one was suicidal...I had got nobody to offload to.”

There was also a need to respect boundaries; tutors realised that they could not support students appropriately within their academic roles where deeply personal issues arose, and recognised a need to engage both central university and external agencies to gain support for students at times. However, knowing that they had responded appropriately in referring students to other agencies could still leave tutors feeling uncomfortable:

“We don't offer counselling ourselves, we refer them to the central university counselling services, but it doesn't get over the fact that sometimes they just tell you these things.”

“We have had to phone ambulances for students before because there has been no support, and certainly here we do attract some very vulnerable students, but it is scary at times.”

In summary, in the light of the nature of the discipline of psychology discussed previously, and a shift towards teaching about more applied aspects of the subject, university teachers feel that it is important to teach sensitive topics, and that there are important benefits around student employability and citizenship to be gained from doing so. However, students may have unrealistic expectations surrounding the role of the tutor, and as such may disclose highly personal information about themselves, which the tutor may feel unable to deal with appropriately. This can have an emotional impact on the tutor themselves, and, even when referring students for more appropriate support from other sources, tutors find this aspect of their jobs challenging.

Discussion

There is little doubt that psychology, within the context of UK higher education at least, is evolving. This evolution sees psychology education moving towards a more applied approach (Trapp et al., 2011), with an increased focus on graduate employability (Reddy, Lantz & Hulme, 2013) and global, or psychologically literate, citizenship (Halpern, 2010; Cranney & Dunn, 2011; Hulme, 2014). This has been reflected within the recently updated QAA (2016) subject benchmark for psychology, which lays down as one of its defining principles that psychology education should:

“lead to an understanding of real life applications of theory to the full range of experience and behaviour and the application of psychological understanding to real world questions” (p7).

Likewise, the BPS (2016) requires undergraduate programme providers seeking accreditation to confer the Graduate Basis for Chartership for their programmes at undergraduate level to demonstrate that they deliver this same principle. Since all UK universities are required to meet QAA standards, and the majority of psychology departments offer a BPS accredited programme, there is considerable pressure on psychology educators to ensure that their courses facilitate students to develop the ability to apply psychology to everyday life; in other words, to develop the psychological literacy of students and graduates.

The participants in our focus groups were keen to frame the teaching of sensitive topics in terms that emphasised their centrality to psychological literacy. Understanding experiences from different human perspectives, and gaining insight into issues surrounding mental health and ill health, for example, is important in equipping graduates with the skills to work with diverse colleagues, for promoting awareness of self and others, and for challenging stigma associated with issues such as mental illness, addiction, and perceptions of cultural diversity.

According to Dunn et al. (2011, p. 16), *“promoting psychological literacy entails reorienting what and how we teach students in a way that emphasizes Psychology’s relevance”*. This can be seen more broadly as good pedagogic practice; for example,

Jones (2009) argues that students are more motivated to learn when they can see the usefulness of the topic of study outside the classroom, and when their interest is engaged, including through the use of emotionally engaging material. Based on the accounts of our focus group participants, teaching sensitive topics is one way in which educators engage students with the relevance of psychology, and make it an interesting subject for academic study.

Thus there are clearly some perceived benefits to teaching students about sensitive topics. However, from our focus group findings, it seems that where these topics have close personal relevance to students, who themselves may be experiencing issues such as mental ill health, or may be involved with friends and family members facing related challenges, this can create difficult situations within an educational context.

We have already seen that the proportion of students disclosing a disability or mental health diagnosis on admission to university is higher for psychology courses than in many other disciplines, and that, indeed, some of these students may choose to study psychology precisely because they expect to be able to learn about their own conditions (Craig & Zinkiewicz, 2010). This increased participation of disabled students and those with mental ill health in psychology education means that a significant minority of any psychology cohort is likely to be comprised of students whose lives are directly affected by topics perceived as 'sensitive' by tutors. This, combined with the prevalence of such topics within the discipline, because of its nature, increases the likelihood of students being personally impacted by the subjects they are studying, with potential emotional consequences, which are likely to lead them to seek further help and support. Our focus group participants reported multiple instances of students disclosing extreme distress, and of instances of such seriousness that on occasion they had felt students' lives were in danger.

This raises important ethical considerations. If a tutor is aware that a topic may be emotionally distressing, and particularly if they are aware of a student who may be of particular concern individually, to what extent should this influence curriculum content and delivery? Is it more ethical not to teach a topic to protect the student, or to teach it to inform the student body about the issues involved? Should tutors warn students of potentially sensitive content, and give them the option to withdraw attendance, or advise them to choose alternative modules where this is possible?

Similarly, our focus group participants suggested that students may expect academic psychologists to have expertise in the fields in which they are delivering, such that they will be able to provide diagnosis, support and possibly treatment. The BPS code of ethics and conduct contains a clear compunction that psychologists should practice within bounds of their competence, and should correct any misrepresentations of their training and qualifications (BPS, 2009, p16); this might imply that it is advisable to remind students that expertise is academic, and not clinical, early in the teaching process, before sensitive topics are addressed. Further research, perhaps through a social identity theoretical lens, into students' perceptions of psychology academics and their role would be useful, to address this from a student perspective and to inform possible strategies for dealing with this.

There is little or no research in the literature looking at the impact of student support needs, or of student disclosures, on the wellbeing of their university tutors. Our findings suggest that dealing with student distress is stressful for tutors, who feel that they have not received adequate training and that they may not be able to access support following critical incidents. This is a matter for concern, particularly given that such incidents seem to be a fairly common experience amongst our participants, and that they are predictable as a result of teaching sensitive topics. Graham, Phelps, Maddison and Fitzgerald (2011) surveyed 508 Australian school teachers, finding that their respondents were frustrated by a lack of training and awareness relating to student mental health, as well as by a lack of wider support for students with mental health issues. Teachers also reported they felt unsupported in their work with students with mental health difficulties. It seems that similar issues may be arising throughout the education system all around the world, and that more training and support are required for teachers of all sorts to better equip them for dealing with student mental health crises.

Reflections: implications for pre-tertiary teaching of psychology

Our research was focused exclusively on university education, but one of us (HK) teaches in a school, and was struck by the extent to which the issues raised by our focus group participants chimed with her experience of working within schools and colleges.

The pre-tertiary psychology curricula do not shy away from the teaching of sensitive topics. For example, the GCSE subject content for psychology (Department for Education, 2015) requires students to learn about mental health problems, including two from a list including clinical depression, schizophrenia, addiction, or autistic spectrum disorder.

Psychology within schools and colleges is highly popular; annually, over 100,000 students currently enrol on level two (GCSE or equivalent) or level three (A levels, Scottish Highers or equivalent) psychology courses (JCQ, 2016). The majority of these students are aged between 16 and 19 years; however, some are as young as thirteen years. Thus, a large number of adolescents are exposed to teaching about sensitive topics every year. Such students are likely to be at least as vulnerable as university students, given their young age. Banyard and Flanagan (2005) claim that:

“It is likely that teachers deal every day with students who have such eating disorders...estimates of young women with mild versions of [anorexia nervosa] are as high as 10 per cent...Teachers might well know the theory of eating disorders but are unlikely to be trained as counsellors to deal with the response they may get from vulnerable students”.

Concerns around the teaching of sensitive topics within the A level curricula have not gone unnoticed, however. The BPS (2013) suggested that there are three main considerations that need to be addressed:

- Upset to students (although they note that it is better to learn about sensitive topics in education than via informal sources);

- Ability of teachers to deal with student responses (they suggest that sensitive topics should be optional rather than compulsory, so that teachers can avoid issues known to be risky for a particular class, and that support materials should be provided to teachers, to facilitate their work with affected students);
- Labelling (a tendency for students to think that they can diagnose mental health conditions, and to see people with mental ill health as 'exotic oddities').

In addition, the authors note that some teachers of psychology within schools and colleges may not be subject specialists, and that some teachers received generic rather than discipline-focused teacher education while others will have received their teacher training in another discipline. As such, a significant proportion of teachers may be approaching the teaching of sensitive topics without appropriate training.

The benefits of learning psychology during adolescence are likely to be very similar to those perceived for university students, in terms of improved understanding of diversity, self-awareness, employability and de-stigmatisation of psychological conditions, and high levels of interest from students. However, reflection on the issues experienced by our focus group participants on their experiences of teaching sensitive topics within universities, suggests that these may be of even more importance within a school or college setting, where students may be considerably younger, and thus potentially more vulnerable, than university students.

Recommendations

Our findings suggest that the teaching of sensitive topics is a potentially risky, but highly valued, activity within psychology education. As such, we need to ensure that students continue to benefit from learning about sensitive topics, but that the risk is minimised for both students and teachers. We suggest that the following recommendations, for both higher education and pre-tertiary psychology teachers, may help to achieve this:

- Further research is needed, to investigate the psychological effects of teaching about sensitive topics, to maximise pedagogical gains and to better understand student and teacher needs and expectations during and following critical incidents to allow risk minimisation;
- Teacher education programmes need to incorporate discipline-specific training for psychology teachers, wherever they work, which addresses approaches to teaching sensitive topics;
- Subject-specific continuing professional development should be made available to qualified and/or experienced psychology teachers who are teaching sensitive topics and perceive a need to develop their skills and awareness when dealing with students with mental ill health;
- Appropriate support needs to be made available to teachers, as well as students, when dealing with critical incidents;

- Curriculum developers need to ensure that potentially sensitive topics are clearly identified to students prior to course or module enrolment, so that they are fully informed, and preferably, sensitive topics should be optional, to allow students to opt out or teachers to decide not to teach to a particular cohort, especially when students are known to be young and/or vulnerable.

Conclusions

Psychology is a fascinating subject, which allows us to understand human behaviour and experience from a range of different perspectives. This makes it highly engaging for students, can develop students' employability, psychological literacy, and citizenship, and makes it rewarding to teach. However, because it is directly relevant to student lives, it can sometimes be 'sensitive', stimulating distress responses in students. Such student disclosures can in turn be stressful for teachers, and it is important to consider ways in which both students and tutors can be better supported to ensure that sensitive topics can be taught safely, and the benefits of learning about them maximised.

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