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Anthropology's Need for Trauma-Informed Approaches: Recognising the Prevalence of Trauma, Navigating its Impacts, and Considerations for Teaching.

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Abstract:
Traumatic experiences are prevalent across all cultures and all Higher Education contexts will almost certainly have survivors of trauma in the classroom as students or teachers. Focusing on the UK Higher Education context, this article draws on data indicating the rates of traumatic experiences among UK University populations in order to demonstrate the need for a trauma-informed approach to teaching anthropology. It goes on to show the ways in which anthropologists have worked with trauma and those who have experienced trauma in order to develop an anthropological interpretation of trauma-informed practices. Trauma-informed approaches centre the needs of survivors in the provision of services. Through reflecting on techniques for teaching a session on 'child sexual abuse and trauma,' I consider practical solutions for teaching challenging topics in ways that diminish possibilities of retraumatisation and vicarious traumatisation.

Keywords: Trauma, trauma-informed, gendered violence, sexual abuse.

Introduction

In 2020 I joined the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales (IICSA) as part of the Research team. The Inquiry was set up in 2016 to investigate institutional failures to protect children and young people. The Research team produced and commissioned research into child sexual abuse drawing on experiences provided by more than 6,000 survivors in England and Wales who shared their experiences with the Inquiry as part of the Truth Project, as well as new datasets generated by research teams. The Truth Project was the largest dataset of its kind into child sexual abuse anywhere in the world. The experience of engaging with this material and people's lived experience was life changing, and I remain humbled by the trust placed in the Inquiry by survivors to produce change, and also immensely proud to have been a part of the Inquiry.

At the same time, while very grateful to have participated in the Inquiry it was also very challenging. For much of the UK's COVID-19 lockdowns, I sat in a corner of our dining room in the North London flat which I'd transformed into a sort of makeshift work area. The Inquiry provided a laptop, mouse, and a swivel office chair. Each morning I logged into work and began the everyday engagement with research on, writing about, and experiences of child sexual abuse. Each day an Inquiry team produced a roundup of news articles from across the world – priests being charged in Australia with decades of sexual crimes; sports coaches convicted of sexually abusing children; and the reporting of survivors coming forward to tell their experiences. For the remainder of the day, I engaged with scholarship and emerging data into prevalence rates, perpetrator types, and survivor journeys, alongside the administrative duties of emails, virtual meetings, and shared electronic documents.

The most engaging and most challenging times were the extended periods of listening to survivor testimonies through headphones, checking transcriptions, and coding them for research. There is a strange intimacy to listening closely to the voices of people you will likely never meet, as they relate experiences that have shaped their lives. As I type this, I notice my hand shaking against the keys. Their voices and testimonies remain with me. These voices were not just about pain and damage, but also told stories of anger, resilience, and glimpses of hope. They were snapshots of people's lives and told of opportunities foreclosed from childhood because of the violent acts of others. They spoke of challenges at school, difficulties in relationships, suicide attempts, unemployment, and the continual refusal by different institutions to effectively respond and support them. Due to acts that were totally outside of their control, these people had their lives shaped – to different extents and in

different ways – by child sexual abuse. These voices trusted me to make their experiences count. They shared these most challenging moments of their lives in order that others might be better supported. This trust placed in researchers to generate change from personal trauma is both a privilege that I feel strongly, and a responsibility that orients my life.

In 2021 I joined the Anthropology and Archaeology department at Bristol and continued to work on child sexual abuse. Led by Jo Stubley at the Tavistock Trauma Centre, and Dr Daniel Taggart at the University of Essex, I joined former Inquiry colleagues and others working in psychology, psychotherapy, and advocacy to form the Network for Non-Recent Child Sexual Abuse. I have conducted research on memoirs written by survivors, interviews with survivors on experiences of disclosures, and worked with practitioners to develop opportunities for facilitating better responses to disclosures. While I have not become complacent about the impacts of working on child sexual abuse, I have become more accustomed to the moments of overwhelm, to the experience of tears springing while working, to the challenge of clinging to the sense that there is hope. I wouldn't describe what I have developed as resilience, but maybe a malleability and recognition that emotional engagement is unavoidable and something I try to embrace. When delivering training to students about working on traumatizing topics, I tell them that becoming desensitised is not the aim of learning to deal with challenging topics, but instead champion being a 'vulnerable observer' and remaining open to having our hearts broken (Behar 1996). Researching trauma and working with survivors of trauma can leave deep imprints in your life.

While I am more than three years into this process of learning to work with traumatising topics, how to teach students about trauma and child sexual abuse and gendered violence while limiting possibilities for retraumatisation and vicarious traumatisation remains a challenge. It is important and fundamental to me to speak with students about the topic and to refuse inherited stigmatisation that we are not supposed to speak about child sexual abuse as it is too difficult. At the same time, I recognise that it is a challenging topic and requires the space and capacity to effectively support students when introducing and discussing it. Anthropology, as I have come to learn, does not deal well with trauma and does not consistently support students and professionals. Anthropology departments do not provide clinical supervisions or regular debrief and/or counselling opportunities (though these may be available in individual institutions subject to individual demand). The impacts of topics, fieldwork, or the everyday violence that some are subject to are atomised as individual challenges to be navigated in the space of our personal lives, not in the dispassionate liberal framework from which anthropology was built.

Drawing on personal reflections working on trauma and experiences teaching and supervising undergraduate students on topics relating to trauma, this article incorporates insights from agnate disciplines to anthropology including social work, education, and psychology, in order to develop a specifically anthropological interpretation of trauma-informed teaching. Developing a trauma-informed practice does not entail demarcating topics deemed too challenging for students, nor does it require giving students a sanitized version of human experience, nor does it consist of irresponsibly confronting students with challenging material unsupported. Rather it ensures that both students and educators are provided with the appropriate support and tools to equitably engage with discussions and insights into challenging topics.

First, this article briefly considers the meanings of 'trauma' and 'trauma-informed approaches' (TIAs) generally and emerging from anthropology specifically. Second, this article demonstrates that available data clearly indicates that there will be survivors of trauma in all of our classrooms, and likely also among staff. As anthropologists we are no less likely – and perhaps even more likely - to experience trauma than others, and our fieldwork methods can directly put researchers directly in challenging situations. Finally, I reflect on my own experiences of working with and through traumatising material, I think through ways in which to improve my own practice in regards to supporting survivors, students, colleagues, and myself as we navigate violent experiences. This article considers the opportunities for developing a trauma-informed approach to teaching anthropology, foregrounding the importance of creating inclusive and equitable spaces for teaching and learning.

Trauma and Trauma-Informed Approaches

Trauma itself remains challenging to define in a holistic sense, and definitions emerge from particular diagnostic categories and within particular historical, social, political, and economic contexts (Young 1996). One widely cited definition of trauma comes from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the US Department of Health and Human Services who state that:

> Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA 2014: 7)

Such a definition is evidently limited and generalised, but nonetheless points towards the long-term and multifaceted impacts of traumatic experiences. Trauma interpolates a person's life and its impacts can be amplified, quietened, heightened and diminished at different times and depending on different circumstances.

Theorists working with trauma to consider the needs of victims and survivors indicate the long-term impacts of experiencing traumatic events or circumstances. Judith Herman writes that "the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others" (1998: S98). This potentially goes further than clinical definitions to begin to engage with how trauma weaves throughout everyday interactions. The ontological security that most take for granted can be shaken to its core. This recognition also facilitates thinking and conversations around the impacts of trauma on entering classrooms and educational contexts. As so much of teaching and learning relies on interpersonal dynamics and engagement, this experience of disempowerment and disconnection risks being replicated – and potentially exacerbated – by teacher-student interactions. Sweeney et al. (2018) found that "forms of (re)traumatisation include the use of 'power-over' relationships that replicate power and powerlessness by disregarding the experiences, views and preferences of the individual" (Sweeney et al. 2018: 322). The dynamics of the classroom and higher education offer particular risks in regards to replicating traumatic dynamics and retraumatisation and understanding trauma demonstrates the necessity of considering the needs of survivors in our everyday teaching and learning contexts.

'Trauma-informed' approaches have emerged as a critical concern of educators across disciplinary fields including social work, social policy, criminology, and areas of sociology (not to mention psychology and psychiatry). While TIAs constitute a commitment to recognising and supporting student and educator needs, teaching traumatising topics and those with the potential to trigger trauma responses without taking appropriate considerations can directly harm students. Herman describes studying trauma as coming "face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature" (2015: 7). This partially encapsulates some of the challenges for a humanistic discipline such as anthropology: how to safely encourage and support students to engage with human vulnerabilities, while also bringing similar understandings of vulnerabilities (though by no means coterminous) to engaging with 'evil' acts. Indeed, Herman reminds us that it was an anthropologist – W.H.R.Rivers - who was central to reorienting the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder for soldiers in the First World War (problematically termed 'shell shock') from a tradition of punishment to one of humane and dignified treatment and the "talking cure" (ibid.: 22).

TIAs and understandings of what they are and how they are implemented differ considerably across academic and clinical fields. Nonetheless, there are common features relating to the recognition of the prevalence of traumatic experiences, the impacts of those experiences, and professional responsibilities. Elliott *et al* (2005) helpfully frame trauma-informed services as "those in which service delivery is influenced by an understanding of the impact of interpersonal violence and victimization on an individual's life and development." (Elliott *et al.* 2005: 462). The core concern of such approaches is taking responsibility to ensure that survivors' needs are supported, and understanding what those needs might be or taking steps to learn what they are.

One challenge that emerges in considering TIAs concerns the variation in how such processes are interpreted and put into practice. For some educators, the term is understood as a form of content warning that establishes a set of practices in the classroom and aims to ensure safety and support for survivors. While some refer to 'trigger warnings,' many critique the term as metaphorically invoking the idea of a firearm with the 'trigger' in the hands of the presenter and the audience in their sights. By contrast, others take issue with locating the 'trigger' within the audience themselves, thereby framing the content itself as somehow objective. Others have suggested the term 'content notification' better encapsulates the aims of providing students with forewarning over challenging topics that will be covered (Laguardia et al. 2017: 899). Prior research has indicated that improperly managed discussions and activities can risk further exposing those with lived experiences of traumatic events to further harm (Harrison *et al.* 2023).

It is important to recognise the risk that in deploying the term 'trauma-informed' in a teaching setting we move it away from its particular meaning in therapeutic and clinical contexts. Indeed, using the term 'trauma' to refer to teaching spaces dedicated to predominantly non-traumatising topics and material might itself raise particular concerns regarding the applicability of the term 'trauma' outside of specific mental health settings and meanings. Sweeney and Taggart (2018) argue that TIAs can be misunderstood as "fuzzy, complex, something that service providers already do, or a theorised call for practitioners to 'be nicer'" (2018: 383). It is not the intention of this article to suggest that TIAs can be deployed as cookie-cutter replications across different disciplinary and therapeutic contexts, but rather to consider the specific ways that TIAs might contribute to facilitating student engagement with challenging material and topics.

Carello and Butler define being trauma-informed as understanding:

> the ways in which violence, victimization, and other traumatic experiences may have impacted the lives of the individuals involved and to apply that understanding to the design of systems and provision of services so they accommodate trauma survivors' needs and are consonant with healing and recovery (Carello and Butler 2015: 264).

TIAs therefore begin with the recognition of the impacts of traumatic experiences, consider the design of systems and provisions, and ensure that survivors' needs are accommodated. Harrison *et al* go further to argue that in university contexts, TIAs must "actively resist vicarious traumatisation" (Harrison et al. 2023: 4). The minimal requirement we should make of our engagements with students and colleagues is that we remove, or at the very least limit, the possibility of traumatisation. An important step towards this aim is to ensure that students and colleagues feel safe in our teaching contexts.

Returning to anthropology from IICSA, I was both more highly attuned to the potentials for traumatisation and retraumatisation and surprised with the seeming silence of the discipline to the needs of survivors, particularly in the aftermath of campaigns such as 'Everyone's Invited' in which most Universities in the UK were reported as sites of rape cultures (Everyone's Invited 2022). Available data clearly indicates that there will likely be survivors or individuals immediately affected by trauma and adverse experiences in every classroom or learning environment, and there is no reason to assume that anthropology would be exceptional in this regard. It is clear that many of the topics taught in anthropology modules and courses – families, races and ethnicities, conflict, migration, economic marginalisation to name a few – have the potential to present challenging material for students and it is often our role as educators within anthropology to navigate, collaborate with, and support students through challenging and timely discussions. In the following section, I look at the prevalence of support in student populations, before moving on to consider teaching approaches that incorporate an understanding of trauma.

UK Higher Educational Context

While there are many experiences that can leave people traumatised, perhaps the most accessible and available data through which to demonstrate the ubiquity of trauma relate to sexual assault and rape, and adverse childhood experiences. Universities in the UK are reluctant to conduct rigorous studies into experiences of sexual assault on campus and, where they do, are even more reluctant to share those findings (Bull et al. 2022). Steele et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of the evidence available globally on the prevalence of sexual assault and victimization in higher education and found that:

> Globally, for HE [higher education] students, the prevalence of any type of SA [sexual assault] victimization was 11% […] Prevalence varied by gender with 17.5% of women experiencing any type of SA […] compared to 7.8% of men […]. Transgender and gender-diverse students experienced 18.1% SA victimization. (Steele et al. 2023: 5).

Within this data, they also found that women experienced higher prevalence rates than men, though had too few data to draw strong conclusions related to transgender and gender-diverse students (2023: 5). Although these prevalence rates are not distributed evenly across the world, they do suggest that many female, transgender, and gender-diverse students experience sexual assaults while in higher education and on our campuses.
Further, many students enter higher education having already experienced challenging childhoods. 'Adverse childhood experiences' refer to events or circumstances known to impact the health and wellbeing of children. In England and Wales, they include verbal, mental, physical and sexual abuse, and also households in which domestic abuse, alcohol abuse, or drug abuse take place. In the first systematic review of the impacts of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) globally, one study found that:

> Associations [between ACEs and impacts] were weak or modest for physical inactivity, overweight or obesity, and diabetes; moderate for smoking, heavy alcohol use, poor self-rated health, cancer, heart disease, and respiratory disease; strong for sexual risk taking, mental ill health, and problematic alcohol use; and strongest for problematic drug use and interpersonal and self-directed violence. (Hughes et al.2017: e363).

While the relationships between these ACEs and experiences in higher education have not been tested, those of us who are student-facing will recognise that mental ill health, alcohol use, and drug use appear to have a particular link to University experiences.

In the UK specifically, studies have consistently demonstrated the considerable and long-term impacts of ACEs to morbidity, short- and long-term health and substance issues, and education and employment opportunities (Bellis et al. 2014; Bellis et al. 2018). In a study of 15,285 adults in England and Wales, Hughes et al. (2020) found that "nearly half of all adults in England and Wales experienced some form of ACE as a child" and nearly one in ten experienced four or more ACEs. It also found that nearly 2.3million children in England currently live in families with "substantial complex needs" (ibid.). Available data indicates that 1 in 6 adults in England and Wales over the age of 16 were sexually abused as a child (Office for National Statistics 2020) and one in four women in England and Wales have been raped or sexually assaulted as an adult (Office for National Statistics 2023). Although we cannot know the relationship between these national rates and the rates for University students, nonetheless they indicate the prevalence of acute traumatic experiences.

Students and colleagues do not enter the classroom as passive, blank slates but as multifaceted human beings, some – even many - of whom will have undergone traumatic experiences. Those of us working on gendered- and sexual-violence know that there we almost certainly have friends and colleagues with lived experiences of violence, and that they are disproportionately likely to be female. TIAs begin with the recognition that there are students in every classroom, and colleagues in every department, for whom challenging topics can make additional demands and can leave more significant long-term implications. TIAs fundamentally aim to ensure equitable access to education for survivors of trauma.

Individuals who hold institutional positions carry a responsibility to limit possibilities of further traumatization, which includes roles such as lecturers, educators, or anybody with a role of authority over students or colleagues. 'Institutional betrayal' refers to the finding that trauma experienced in an institutional setting may cause more severe outcomes than those experienced in non-institutional contexts (Smith and Freyd 2013). Smith and Freyd's (2013) study of 514 undergraduate students in a large, public northwestern university in America found that "sexually assaulted women who also experienced institutional betrayal experienced higher levels of several posttraumatic symptoms" (ibid.: 122). Further, and significant given likely rates of experiences of sexual assault and violence in higher education, they also found that "betrayals occurring in events leading up to sexual assault such as creating an environment that is conducive to sexual assault were more commonly reported than insufficient responses" following the reporting of sexual assault (ibid.: 123). Such contexts might include the normalisation of macho cultures, the silencing of survivors when they report, the poor treatment of survivors when reporting, or lack of follow-up to reporting. Institutions – and universities specifically here – therefore have a crucial role to play in supporting survivors and minimizing the impacts of trauma and retraumatization.

We therefore know that we are likely to have trauma survivors sitting in our classrooms, likely have them as colleagues, and may well be survivors of trauma ourselves. We know that trauma can impact all areas of a person's life, and even "the physical, embodied feeling of being alive" (Van der Kolk 2014: 2). We know that trauma often directly impacts the likelihood of a survivor entering higher education, and their experiences when they do so (Carello and Butler 2015). And we know from cognate disciplines that material relating to topics including migration, conflict, interpersonal violence (and many others) carry the possibility of negatively impacting those who have experienced trauma (Carello and Butler 2015). Given available data on experiences of sexual- and gender-based violence in the UK and the reporting of hate crimes, we know as well that women and minoritised communities are disproportionately likely to experience forms of violence. We also know that retraumatization and triggering is not limited to the content being presented but the very dynamics of those interactions, including the power of educator above and over students, or the lack of control felt by students. Given the extent of this knowledge, and how much of it is common knowledge, how has anthropology engaged with these insights, and how should we respond in our teaching?

Trauma-Informed Anthropology

There are considerable opportunities for teaching and research in anthropology to improve its support, understanding, and accessibility for those with lived experiences of trauma. Popular blog posts written by current and recent PhD students indicate that this reckoning over anthropology's "cruelty which masquerades as intellectual rigour" and its patchwork engagement with gender-based and sexual violence in the field and professional practice are long overdue (Beckett 2019; see also Di Leonardo 2018, Evans 2017, and Shulist and Mulla 2022). In the following section, I consider anthropologists' insights into trauma and with participants who have experienced trauma in order to develop an understanding of how to approach and support survivors. While there remain opportunities to develop a more systematic embedding of trauma-informed practices within anthropology, nonetheless anthropologists have already produced evidence-based and robust indications of how best to support trauma survivors.

Anthropologists have contributed to challenging and contextualising the meaning of 'trauma' through close engagement with those who have been most affected by violent and extreme events. Young (1996) demonstrates the particular historical and social contexts that shaped the diagnoses and production of PTSD. Young emphasises that this critique in no way questions the experiences of survivors:

> the reality of PTSD is confirmed empirically by its place in people's lives, by their experiences and convictions, and by the personal and collective investments that have been made in it. (Young 1996: 5)

However, he asserts that it is anthropology's role to question the historicity and universality of PTSD and to avoid generalising particular historical constructions to different contexts and times. Similarly, Hacking notes the changeability and historical particularity of the term 'child abuse' (importantly in contrast to 'child sexual abuse') and the changes in meaning and interpretation that emerge over time (Hacking 1991). 'Trauma' and related terms are therefore continually undergoing negotiations and shifts in meaning as they cross contexts.

Anthropologists have also engaged with how trauma inscribes on the body and work of the anthropologist themselves. In Sur's moving and personal reflection on conducting research in the violent and militarised Northeast India-Bangladesh borderlands, she articulates that:

> writing anthropology requires the repeated living of immersive near-death experiences, the traumas of those we lived and travelled with as well as those who posed dangers to our lives.
> In waking and dreaming, unmoored sounds and voices only partly find expression in words. (Sur 2020: 148).

Anthropologists and their bodies therefore bear testimony to the inscription of trauma and its impacts on lives.

Silence, unspokenness, and the impossibility of conveying pain reverberate across ethnographic engagements with trauma[1]. In Scarry's seminal work on pain and the body, she writes that "whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unshareability, and it ensures this unshareability through its resistance to language" (Scarry 1985: 4). While much is unshareable, nonetheless trauma can communicate across barriers of silence. Kidron's work with Holocaust survivors and their descendants in Israel demonstrates the ways in which unspoken histories of trauma are transmitted inter-generationally (2009). Kidron shows the unspeakability of some traumatic events, and sensitively engages with the silent daily rituals and practices that communicate histories of trauma non-verbally: shoes left in readiness by the bed; a spoon kept from Auschwitz (2009: 11, 13). Indeed, "the very bond between humanity and language is challenged as trauma continues to elide translation" across cultures, time periods, and between survivors and those who have not experienced the traumatic event (Pillen 202016: 106). Anthropology therefore has an important role to play in its close attention to how unspeakable experiences find expression in everyday life.

Ethnographies conducted with participants who have experienced trauma also demonstrate the capacity for engaged listening. This listening goes beyond words and silences to consider how bodies and actions speak. Warin and Davis worked with Persian women migrants in Australia and demonstrated how past traumatic experiences are "vitally present in the bodies of actors in the present" (Warin and Dennis 2009: 101). Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy complementarily argue that sometimes anthropologists need to respect that

[1] However, the expression of trauma is not necessarily restricted to such reactions. Conversely, some people respond to traumatic experiences by over-sharing instead (e.g. 'trauma dumping' - https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-is-trauma-dumping).

some experiences should not be the subject of our research, saying "some gaps and erasures maintained by our research participants cannot and should not be documented and/or ethnographically represented" (Chatzipanagiotidou & Murphy 2021: 467). Working with trauma does not require that participants directly articulate their experiences, but rather anthropologists should develop different capacities for listening.

Anthropologists have also engaged with historical trauma, including the legacies of the Holocaust, colonial violence, and violent displacement. Trundle and Vaeau (2023) emphasise the relational notions of trauma through focusing on historical trauma theory (HTT) and decolonisation in Aotearoa. Their work demonstrates the imperative of culturally-informed approaches to understanding and responding to trauma, and in their powerful paper show the necessity of Māori methods of healing for responding to intergenerational and historical trauma for their students and in their scholarly practice (Trundle and Vaeau 2023). Trauma is thus not only related to experiences happening to us as individuals but can also relate to historical and generational traumas.

One common theme to ethnographic engagements with trauma and traumatic histories is the importance of close, sensitive listening to participants. Dragojlovic and Samuels point towards this form of intuitive engagement:

> We point to what it means to *trace* silences, and to include traces of silence in our ethnographic representations. What qualifies as silence, and how does it relate to articulation, to voice, visibility and representation? How can silences be sensed and experienced viscerally as well as narratively? And how do we think with and start interpreting silences in the face of potential unknowability? (Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021: 418).

While the silences they are speaking of refer to challenging histories and events that ethnographic participants do not speak about, we might also deploy these insights into anthropological teaching. How can we grasp and interpret students' and colleagues' silences? How aware are we of the silences during our teaching? Are students engaged, switching off? How might we best take responsibility and control for these silences, and develop them as supportive and empowering opportunities?

How, then, to be 'trauma-informed' when the 'trauma' we are hoping to be informed by is undergoing negotiation and change? Such a question demands that we recognise that a part of being trauma-informed is remaining aware of the particular formations of trauma currently circulating among communities with whom we work. These could be groups of students that we teach, participants and co-researchers with whom we conduct research, colleagues in our schools and departments, and even potentially ourselves as equally vulnerable to traumatisation, re-traumatisation, and vicarious traumatisation. In the following section I consider how I deploy TIAs in my teaching of traumatising topics.

Practices and Reflections

At the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Bristol, we have a third-year undergraduate module called 'Human Challenges.' It is team-taught and each week a different lecturer gives a session on something they have defined as a human challenge and consider what anthropology or archaeology might reveal about the challenge. Students choose one of the term's topics from the ten available, and write a 3,500 word essay on a question they have developed with the lecturer. For the last three years I have taught the session on 'Child sexual abuse and the challenges of trauma,' and have helped students create over thirty individual papers. While my research concerns child sexual abuse, I encourage them not to take on the topic as the subject of their own essay as it is acutely challenging and can make demands on individuals that are not always the best timed alongside the stress of final year assessments. The majority of the teaching reflections here concern these sessions.[2]

The Human Challenges module is a mandatory unit for third year Anthropology students and each year the lecture is very well attended, with attendance numbers varying from around 50 to 80. When delivering content around child sexual abuse and trauma this presents a considerable challenge: how to present difficult material

[2] This course did not have lecture attendance monitoring until the academic year 2024-2025. However, now that student attendance is monitored and mandatory this raises challenges for the session – particularly for those who have a minimum attendance requirement for visa or related issues. In future years I will find a way to enable students to both attend and opt out of material that may cause them unnecessary distress, potentially through introducing an option to leave the room (or not return) from a break organised early in the session.

relating to child sexual abuse while remaining attuned to the needs of all the students present. Given that there will be a limit of roughly twelve students allowed to choose this topic for their essay, what do I hope the remainder will gain? As I reflect, I consider it important in itself that students gain a greater understanding of the impacts of trauma on people's lives, the prevalence of trauma in UK society (as well as elsewhere), and specifically challenge – albeit in a limited way – the stigmatisation of child sexual abuse. With these specific, though informal, learning outcomes, I orient the content of my sessions towards equipping everybody present with a basic understanding of trauma, knowledge of available statistics, and opening discussions around how we approach and interpret other people's experiences. In the remainder of this session I consider the different TIAs I implement to try to make the lectures as accessible as possible in spite of the challenging material.

First, this year I have introduced a one-minute reflection period held when people have found their seats. Encouraged through my own experiences of introducing a ten minute silent 'check-in' at the start of the working day, this is a time to lower the stress and rush of arriving in a lecture theatre, catching up with friends, switching on laptops and checking phones. For me, this minute is also important as I become increasingly tense in the lead-up to the sessions. They are emotionally and intellectually draining and they demand a lot from me. This stress can accumulate, and I find that by the time I begin teaching I am rushing and angry (not with the students, with the material). Introducing a one minute's quiet enables me to take the tempo down a little. When the minute is over, the classroom is absolutely silent and the students and I can begin quietly and softly to engage with the topic. I point out that this is also a time to curate the classroom around us – this is a space for support and engagement with a topic most would prefer to avoid. I make a point of thanking the students for following the minute's quiet.

Second, I include a content warning in which I outline some of the challenging topics that we are going to be talking about. I state directly that those with lived experiences are not expected nor should feel compelled to share their experiences during the session, and that it is my role as educator to take the responsibility for providing material for discussion. I clearly state that there will be opportunities to leave the room during scheduled 5- and 10-minute breaks, and that there will be no 'calling out' of anybody who needs to leave at any time. I also signpost opportunities for support within the Department, the University, and via the National Health Service in the UK as well as a signposting webpage for support services for survivors. I continually emphasise that the most important outcome of the session is our own health and wellbeing, and that I am part of that process. I ask them to support each other and also to support me as I navigate these topics.

Third, I show students a layout of the 2 hour session, particularly highlighting the breaks built into the content. There are three formal breaks – two five minute breaks either side of the most challenging content, and a ten minute break around half way through. I introduced the two five minute breaks after realising that students might feel trapped into experiencing the challenging content without needing to stand up in the middle of a lecture and leave. Indeed, through informal feedback with students I learned that some had dissociated when presented with challenging statistics and quotations on the powerpoint screen and felt physically incapable of moving or leaving the room. While I emphasise that I would be very comfortable with students leaving if they need to, and can reach out to me afterwards, I recognise that drawing attention to oneself in this way is challenging and maybe even damaging to the student. These five minute breaks allow students simply not to return during the challenging section, and to rejoin once it is concluded. I let them know that the powerpoint slides and lecture recording will be uploaded so they won't miss out on any of the lecture content if they would like to see what was covered.

Fourth, I build structured discussion and reflection time into the session. I include multiple discussion slides with guiding questions, including encouraging students to share reflections on how they find the content. I also emphasise a consideration of what they will do following the session – could they plan for a deload of some sort? What kind of thing could they do to 'recalibrate'? Following the 'think, pair and share' strategy, I encourage students to consider different questions in peer pairs before coming together as a group to discuss them. I make sure to reduce my presence as far as possible by sitting in a chair, or at the very least moving away from the centre of the room to further facilitate more informal discussions. Circulating during these discussions also enables me to pick up on how students are finding the session, their capacities, and how to modify the content when we return to the lecture format.

While there will always be dangers of retraumatisation and vicarious traumatisation related to discussing child sexual abuse, these four practical approaches have considerably improved students and my experience of the session. Trying to ensure the right balance between educator responsibility in regards to safeguarding those who

are survivors of trauma in the room, and our role to engage with and discuss challenging topics, these techniques foreground the importance of care alongside the necessity of confronting difficult truths.

Recognising Trauma Responses

While it might appear common sensical, it is worth reiterating that a trauma-informed approach demands being informed about trauma and, specifically, common responses to traumatic events. Although an involved discussion of responses to trauma is beyond the scope of this paper (and, indeed, better placed within disciplines outside of anthropology).

While much focus relies, understandably, on the experiences of students in the room, it is also necessary to consider how to embed trauma-informed practices for staff themselves. The realities of teaching loads, especially for those with an expertise in teaching and pedagogy, means that many are teaching TIAs without having the capacity to follow their own advice. I recognise in my own teaching around child sexual abuse that I dedicate slides to facilitating student wellbeing following the sessions and emphasise the importance of taking the time to deload and process the challenging material. However, I feel that I do not have the capacity to follow these same support mechanisms to facilitate my own processing of challenging material and student responses. Finding some space following the session – I find that taking a few minutes for some quite reflection, talking with a friend or colleague, or another way to decompress is central to being able to teach and work on traumatizing topics.

Managing student disclosures of traumatic experiences during class time can present its own series of challenges. I make a point of ensuring that victims and survivors do not feel responsible for sharing their experiences of trauma, or in any way required or expected to share their experiences. Indeed, as students from minoritised communities particularly relate, being expected to share challenging experiences in order to facilitate the learning of those without lived experiences can replicate and reify the types of exclusion these sessions aim to critique. In a similar way, it is incumbent on educators to ensure that they assume the responsibility to educate and facilitate student learning without generating additional requirements for those in the room with lived experiences.

Where students do disclose, educators are faced with a series of considerations regarding how to act upon the disclosure. Does the student require follow-up after the session and how might educators do this in a way that neither belittles nor stigmatises the student? Should the session be paused or reoriented? Should the student be encouraged to share further, and how might educators risk being seen as silencing if they foreclose further disclosures? While some disclosures may require the ending of the session for the welfare of the student, from my experience there is a subtle form of navigating between the agency of the student in demonstrating and attuning their expertise and lived experiences and identifying a request for help veiled in academic language and discussion.

Many of these considerations may find forms of resolution in the educator ensuring that they know students and the dynamics of individual cohorts in order to contribute to their ability to read and understand emotional responses. It can be a challenge to differentiate between active engagement with presentation materials and forms of dissociation: in both cases students may be sitting, eyes glued to the materials. Indeed, in one session during a 'check in' with students it emerged that many felt frozen by the data presented to them on the screen. This was an opportunity to demonstrate a trauma-informed approach through temporarily removing the presentation from the screen, facilitating pair discussions about the challenges of the material but also means of coping, and taking a break in which I informally spoke with different students about the session and capacities to continue (taking care not to 'pick out' those who appeared to be having the strongest responses, but making them aware of my availability to receive feedback). Once students returned, I emphasised that the remainder of the session would foreground coping and resilience, and that there would be further opportunities for check-ins. After the session I followed up with those students who had elicited strong responses in order to receive feedback about how to reduce such forms of traumatisation. Choosing a moment when everybody was packing up bags and laptops, and after answering individual student questions, I positioned myself to chat to them as we all left the lecture theatre and we walked back towards the Department together. Students indicated that, while parts of the session were challenging, the ways in which these sections were scaffolded and book-ended with opportunities for deload and an emphasis on opportunities for recovery gave them a confidence in engaging with the material. While this might partially be understood as students wanting to provide positive feedback to the lecturer, nonetheless these types of informal feedback and engagement can facilitate further reflection on our teaching methods. In future sessions I built in further deload opportunities around the most challenging sections of the presentation, and carefully considered the ways in which to identify dissociation.

While facilitating student disclosures of traumatic events can be a rewarding experience for staff members working on challenging topics, there remain challenges concerning lecturers' capacity to appropriately respond to such disclosures and institutional frameworks within which many of us work. For those without clinical or therapeutic expertise (such as myself) there can be a very fine line to tread between knowledge of support pathways or avenues for coping and recovery, and a recognition of the limitations of what we are able to offer students. Further, presenting ourselves as staff members with expertise around challenging experiences can mean that students view us as the best point-of-contact through which to navigate their own difficulties, including mental health.

Conclusions

It is important for anthropology to continue to grapple with ways in which to make learning environments equitable, supportive, and engaging. TIAs point towards the importance of listening closely to our students and colleagues as they navigate Higher Education, and especially pay attention to how our teaching carries the risk of retraumatising and vicarious traumatisation. TIAs ensure that we continue to be able to engage in challenging and timely topics, and don't shy away from difficult conversations. Instead, they ensure that as far as possible all students and colleagues receive equal opportunities to take part in the conversations and are acknowledged and presented in how we teach.

Once known, the prevalence of traumatic experiences and their impacts for survivors demands that we engage differently with students and colleagues. While anthropology has an uneasy relationship with therapeutic disciplines, nonetheless the basic understanding that there will be people with experiences of trauma in our learning environments should be sufficient to shift how we approach teaching challenging topics. Traumatic experiences including sexual assault, rape, adverse childhood experiences, and historical and generational traumas demonstrate the need for anthropologists to develop strategies through which we ensure equitable access to our classrooms.

TIAs vary in their interpretation and implementation, however they all begin with the recognition of trauma and its impacts and the understanding that this requires a change in delivery. For anthropology, this means ensuring that when engaging with challenging topics and material we are proactive in mitigating risks of retraumatisation and vicarious traumatisation. My approach, which includes the recognition that it will continue to develop and adapt to changing cohorts and contexts, involves modelling and ensuring that students feel supported when engaging with the topic of child sexual abuse. It involves content warnings that empower students to know what we will cover and ways in which to process and approach the topics. There are adequate breaks embedded in the session, and students are empowered to choose the sections they attend. I ensure that I monitor and have opportunities for engaging with the emotional responses and capacities of the students. We can never know everything that learners are bringing to our learning spaces, but we can be proactive in ensuring that we listen closely and support the needs of those around us.

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