

# Teaching Sensitive Issues: Psychological literacy as an antidote to pedagogic frailty

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*Many topics within the psychology curriculum can be described as 'sensitive', with potential for students to experience distress and discomfort. Given the pressure experienced by academics in Higher Education, the potential for student distress or complaints might lead lecturers to adopt a risk-averse approach to teaching, which is well represented by the concept of Pedagogic Frailty (Kinchin et al., 2016). Through interviews with nine psychology lecturers, we uncover the common concerns that arise when teaching sensitive topics, and the strategies employed to overcome these concerns. We also suggest that where teaching is strongly influenced by the values underpinning Psychological Literacy, those teaching sensitive topics may be less vulnerable to the characteristics of Pedagogic Frailty, as the risks associated with the teaching of sensitive topics are offset by the perceived importance of exposing students to sensitive topics. The implications for the teaching of psychology are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Psychological literacy; pedagogic frailty; sensitive topics; risk aversion; learning environment.

ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS of psychology as a discipline is that the student and the studied are one and the same; psychology involves the study of people, by people. In one way, this confers an advantage as students' engagement with course material can be enhanced through reflexive awareness. However, the counterpoint is the likelihood that students will personally identify with the material being studied, and this can leave students vulnerable to discomfort.

In recent years, undergraduate Psychology education has become increasingly organised around the concept of psychological literacy. This organising concept represents not only possessing knowledge, skills and competencies, but also being able to apply one's learning of psychology to real-world problems and situations (e.g. Halpern, 2010). Looking to some of the components of psychological literacy as represented by McGovern et al. (2010, p.11), this application is readily apparent. Core elements of being psychologically literate include: '*Having a well-defined vocabulary and basic knowledge of the critical subject matter of psychology*'; '*Applying psychological principles to personal, social and organisational issues in work, relationships and*

*the broader community*'; '*Being insightful and reflective about ones' own and others' behaviour and mental processes*'; and '*Recognising, understanding and fostering respect for diversity*'.

There are many areas within the psychology curriculum where students have the opportunity to apply psychological principles to personal and social issues, and where they can reflect on their own behaviour and mental processes. The elements of psychological literacy listed above would be relevant to the teaching of many areas of psychology including, but not limited to: personality, intelligence, social influence, stigma, physical and mental health, and sexuality. All of these topics represent what we might class as 'sensitive' (Poe, 2000). Whilst it is important for students of psychology to understand, for example, the aetiology of depression, if a student themselves or a close friend or family member have experience of this or another mental illness, then they may find lectures upsetting. Many psychology educators are keenly aware of the risks associated with the teaching of sensitive topics, and may struggle to balance coverage of important topics alongside an ethical approach to teaching which 'includes attention to avoiding actions or inactions that may cause

students educational or emotional harm' (Hill & Zinsmeister, 2012, p.125).

One potentially useful framework for understanding these challenges faced by psychology educators when teaching sensitive issues is pedagogic frailty (Kinchin et al., 2016). The framework proposes that the multiple demands and changing pressures of academia render vulnerability to frailty, which in this sense reflects greater propensity to be adversely affected by changes to the environment:

*In the context of higher education teaching, one might observe pedagogic frailty when colleagues find the cumulative pressures of academia eventually inhibiting their capacity to change practice in response to an evolving teaching environment, leading them to adopt what they might consider a 'safe' and sustainable pedagogic approach' (Kinchin et al., 2016, p.2).*

In the pedagogic frailty framework (see Figure 1), this sense of frailty, characterised by risk aversion and a loss of adaptability, is influenced by: the predominance of instructional discourse (e.g. the content, pacing and sequencing of teaching) over regula-

tive discourse (the values that underpin teaching); lack of synergy between pedagogy and discipline; unresolved tension within the research-teaching nexus; and a perceived external locus of control.

We might therefore imagine that a lecturer experiencing the symptoms of frailty would be concerned about the risks involved in teaching sensitive topics, and prefer instead to adopt a 'safe and sustainable' approach by minimising students' exposure to such material. This risk averse approach is more likely if the discourse of pedagogy focuses on what and when to teach material (i.e. the instructional discourse) rather than the values underlying the curriculum (i.e. the regulative discourse), and if there is no clear link between what to teach and how to teach it (i.e. a lack of synergy between discipline and pedagogy). In addition, this risk averse approach is more likely if unresolved tension exists within the research-teaching nexus, for example where the pressure to reach research targets limits the time available to develop innovative approaches to teaching, and if the individual perceives they have little agency to implement change (i.e. an external locus of control).

How might this framework inform

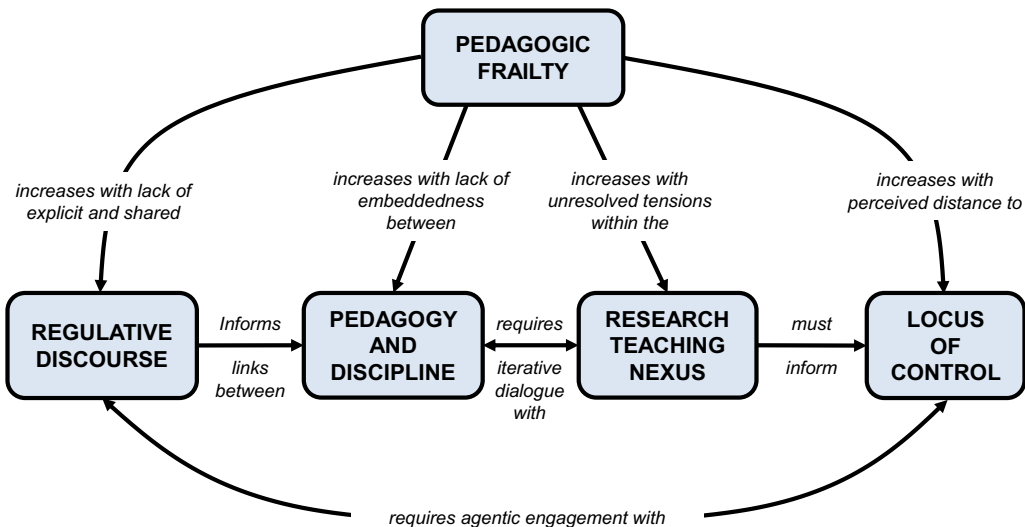


Figure 1: Model of pedagogic frailty (Kinchin et al., 2016).

our understanding of the teaching of psychology? Kinchin et al. (2016) argue that of the four influences on pedagogic frailty, the strength of regulative discourse, and the synergy between pedagogy and discipline are more strongly under the control of the individual, whereas the degree of tension within the research-teaching nexus, and the distance of the perceived locus of control from the individual, are more strongly under the control of the institution. Therefore, when considering the decision-making of an individual psychology lecturer faced with teaching sensitive material, we can look to the first two influences.

Pedagogic frailty has already been explored in the context of psychology education (Winstone & Hulme, 2017). Through an interrogation of the framework in the context of the teaching of psychology, Winstone and Hulme concluded that psychological literacy, as a concept, might confer an advantage in terms of minimising vulnerability to frailty. First, psychological literacy, if embedded at programme level, has the potential to facilitate explicit discussion of the regulative discourse. This is because psychological literacy is values-based, and these values have the potential to drive pedagogic decision-making. Second, psychological literacy is an integrative disciplinary concept, in that it binds together what is taught (the discipline) with how it is taught (the pedagogy); the emphasis on the application of psychological knowledge directly informs pedagogic decision-making. Winstone and Hulme also suggest how psychological literacy might buffer against the adoption of a safe and sustainable approach when teaching sensitive topics. Through presentation of a case study, they show how a social psychology lecturer was willing to take significant risks in exposing students to distressing situations in the field, and how these decisions were driven by the values underlying psychological literacy.

According to Pittenger (2006), it is impossible to teach a psychology course without invoking and confronting controversy. Given

the inherent risks, what steps can be taken to mitigate against adverse outcomes? Several authors have emphasised the importance of giving students advance notice that potentially sensitive material will be covered in class (Finken, 2006; Goss-Lucas & Bernstein, 2005; Russell et al., 2008). Whilst it is possible for students to be told that they can leave a class if they find the material uncomfortable (Lantz, 2010), it is better for them to know in advance of attending, as leaving a classroom makes their discomfort salient to everyone (Brooke, 1999). When covering sensitive material, Lantz (2010) suggests that very clear ground rules for class discussion, including confidentiality, need to be agreed in advance, and that educators need to ensure that their own views and feelings do not influence the way in which they teach. It is also recommended that educators illustrate material using vignettes or case studies, rather than asking students to share their own experiences (Finken, 2006).

It is evident that many of the topics taught within the psychology curriculum can be classed as sensitive. The controversy arising from sensitive topics can readily lead to student complaints (e.g. Pittenger, 2006), which may lead educators to adopt the risk averse approach to teaching that is characteristic of a state of pedagogic frailty. The aim of the present study was to explore the views held by psychology educators regarding the teaching of sensitive topics, and to uncover the strategies they adopt when teaching such issues.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Interviews were undertaken with nine psychology academics, all of whom taught on a BSc Psychology programme at a university in the South East of England. Recruitment involved inviting 15 lecturers who taught areas of psychology where potentially 'sensitive' content would be covered to participate; of these, nine agreed to take part (see Table 1). All participants were female. The participants represented a wide

range of teaching experience, ranging from 1 to 30 years. Of the nine participants, two were Teaching Fellows, five were Lecturers, one was a Reader, and one was a Professor. All participants were acquainted with the first author.

**Table 1: Participant details.**

Pseudonym	Curriculum areas taught
Clare	Developmental Psychology
Victoria	Social Psychology
Nicola	Social Psychology
Helen	Clinical Psychology
Lisa	Health Psychology
Alice	Health Psychology
Sharon	Developmental Psychology
Penny	Personality and Individual Differences
Rebecca	Health Psychology

**Procedure**

The protocol was reviewed by the Institution’s Ethics Committee, and a favourable ethical opinion granted. Participants were recruited via email, and were invited to take part in an interview about approaches to teaching psychology. All participants provided informed consent for their participation, and during this process it was made clear to participants that the study was not an evaluation of their own teaching practice, but rather an opportunity to explore the influences on pedagogic decision-making within their subject area.

Interviews were audio recorded to allow later transcription, and followed a semi-structured format. The interview schedule began with a general discussion of approaches to

teaching, within which participants were invited to explain the areas of psychology they teach. Participants were then asked to identify potentially sensitive topics in the teaching of psychology, and to discuss potential approaches to teaching those topics. The length of the interviews ranged from 11 to 33 minutes, with an average of 20 minutes (SD=8).

Following completion of the interview, participants were presented with a list of the 10 core areas of psychology taught in UK BPS-accredited Psychology BSc degrees (BPS, 2016: Cognitive Psychology; Developmental Psychology; Social Psychology; Biological Psychology; Conceptual and Historical Issues in Psychology (CHIP); Personality and Individual Differences; Data Analysis; Quantitative Methods; Qualitative Methods; Ethics). They were instructed to first rank the 10 areas according to how sensitive they perceived the topic content to be (where 1 represented the most sensitive area, and 10 the least sensitive area). Finally, they were asked to rank the same ten areas according to their real-world relevance (where 1 represented the greatest real-world relevance, and 10 the least real-world relevance). The purpose of this activity was to gain insight into participants’ views of the potential sensitivity of different areas of the psychology curriculum, alongside their perception of the real-world relevance of the subject content. The activity took place at the end of the interview so as to avoid influencing participants’ discussion during the interview.

**Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, a realist approach was utilised, incorporating an inductive and iterative process of identifying semantic themes. First, a phase of familiarisation with the data entailed multiple readings of all nine transcripts by both authors independently, noting any initial codes that were evident within transcripts. Due to a high

degree of commonality in the codes identified across transcripts and between the two authors, the next phase involved analysis of the whole sample. Here, the initial codes were grouped into themes, and then iteratively refined through application of a coding framework to the complete set of transcripts. Analysis of the entire sample and the application of the coding framework were initially undertaken by the first author, following which the second author reviewed the coded transcripts to ensure reliability. Inter-author agreement was high, so the coding of the first author was taken as reliable.

### Findings

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four main themes representing the key elements of teaching sensitive material. Within each main theme, four subthemes emerged (see Table 2). There was strong convergence of data, with evidence of each theme and subtheme in each of the nine transcripts.

#### Learning environment

When discussing their teaching of sensitive topics, the lecturers discussed the learning environment as an influence on their teaching, as well as something they specifically craft to create an environment conducive to the discussion of potentially sensitive material. For several lecturers, the size and level of group that they are teaching influences the extent to which they feel comfortable covering sensitive topics:

1. *With groups of about 20 as opposed to a hundred.... it's a lower risk strategy trying to open [discussion].* (Lisa)
2. *I don't think I would want to do [sensitive topics] with a first year. And I would never do it, erm, in the big lecture theatre. I think that's only good for small groups, once students know each other, and they're accepting and supportive of each other.* (Clare)

Here, lecturers express a belief that the teaching of sensitive material requires a good level of rapport between students, and that the discussion needed to facilitate discussion of sensitive topics is less 'risky' with smaller groups. Lecturers also discussed how the nature of the topic being taught was an important influence on the kind of learning environment that could be created, and how safe students perceive that environment to be:

3. *If you're talking about things like um gender or sexual health... clearly it's more sensitive... and it's also less commonly talked about full stop. Whereas, you know, physical health, whether its cancer, heart attack... that is a bit more part of our general dialogue, so I think students can open up about that a lot more.* (Lisa)

It was also evident from their discussions that lecturers pay particularly close attention to their use of humour and language when teaching sensitive material, and that this represents an important dimension of the learning environ-

Table 2: Main themes and subthemes.

Main Theme	Learning environment	Concerns	Strategies to manage concerns	Psychological Literacy
Subthemes	Group size	Distress	Disclaimers	Real-world application
	Nature of Topic	Self-disclosure and misdiagnosis	Opt in	Legitimisation of issues
	Use of language and humour	Lack of training	Signposting	Students as ambassadors
	Rapport	Complaints	Heightened awareness	Student interest

ment that is specifically crafted to support the teaching of sensitive topics. Penny, an Individual Differences lecturer, explained how she reigned in her use of humour because of the perceived risk of causing offence:

4. *I suppose when I've taught things that are more benign, less risky I'd be more likely to have like a cartoon to illustrate or give an example a bit extreme or a bit humorous. I don't do that when it comes to sensitive topics.* (Penny)

The nature of language used is also a consideration for lecturers when teaching sensitive material. For some, this involved thinking about the style of language: Lisa spoke about using more benign terminology in her teaching of sensitive topics (*'we talk in a fairly clinical, more neutral way'*), whereas Penny explained her sensitivity to the use of terminology that might 'pigeon hole' people (*'I try to avoid slipping into any categorical sounding terms'*). It was also clear that language is a tool which, if harnessed correctly, can help to create the open and inclusive learning environment which is beneficial for the teaching of sensitive materials:

5. *If you then annoy [students] by using the wrong language or talking in a way that they find inappropriate then they'll stop listening, so you have to be very inclusive when you're talking, otherwise you'll lose them.* (Alice)

Alongside the use of language, behaviours that develop rapport with students, and promote shared understanding amongst students are also important elements of an appropriate learning environment. Specific effort is needed to create and facilitate such an environment:

6. *Actually spending time and getting people to express their opinions and views and create an environment where people can actually say those things in a safe place.* (Sharon)

7. *We move on to these topics part way through the module so I feel like we've already got rapport with the students at that point which*

*I think helps. We had a bit of a conversation about confidentiality if you hear somebody else's disclosure.* (Penny)

As expressed by Penny, the importance of developing rapport and a 'safe' environment for the exploration of sensitive topics can influence not only what is taught and how, but also when this material is covered.

### Concerns

When discussing the teaching of sensitive topics, lecturers were clear in voicing concerns about the potential implications, both for themselves and for their students. When considering their students, their primary concern was of causing distress, which was a driver of decision-making in the preparation and delivery of content (quotes 8 and 9), as well as creating concern for students' independent study (10):

8. *People may have experienced prejudice and discrimination if this will bring up bad memories for themselves...so you have to really work or think very carefully.* (Nicola)

9. *Well some of the pictures were quite shocking... I was like 'pff! God that's quite graphic!'... you know in terms of the damage that can be done.* (Helen)

10. *I guess one issue is that you don't want to cause any distress to the students in the room... or when they go away thinking about the material afterwards or when they're reading about it. ... we know we're going to be hitting a lot of sensitive buttons.* (Penny)

Beyond causing distress, one particular concern arising from the teaching of topics in the area of mental health is that students might, as a result of learning about a particular area, disclose their own difficulties to the lecturer. Penny speaks of this concern, as well as the likelihood of students misdiagnosing themselves on the basis of their learning:

11. *I can imagine a teacher feeling wary that a student might come and disclose something as a result of what they've taught. And I have*

*had that quite a few times... But there's a danger of...over-diagnosing oneself. Personality disorders is a particularly high risk lecture for misdiagnosing because it's just describing patterns of personality essentially.* (Penny)

As well as expressing concerns about the impact of teaching sensitive topics on their students, lecturers also surfaced concerns about the potential impact on themselves. Many of the participants (with the exception of the lecturer in clinical psychology) did not feel qualified to deal with students' disclosures or distress that might result from the teaching of sensitive topics:

12. *How would the teacher know without the individual students coming forward and saying 'I don't feel comfortable with this'? You can't anticipate everything and perhaps there is a one in a million chance that something will happen but if it does it has potential to get blown out of proportion.* (Sharon)
13. *I guess there's a combination of expertise in terms of managing what might come from the sensitivity but also just thinking through the realities of should we be doing it this way?* (Helen)
14. *I don't think I ever got any training or mentorship on how to do this. So it's been trial and error...mess up and learn from it sort of approaches. Or, you know, think through really carefully in advance.* (Penny)

As well as lack of expertise and training, one of the most prominent concerns was a fear of student complaints and, the potential implications that might result. It was evident from the ways in which lecturers spoke of this particular concern that the 'fear' of student complaints had a profound influence on what they were prepared to do in their teaching:

15. *I'm very sensitive to what [students] might say.* (Clare)
16. *I think people say 'okay if I don't talk about it then I'm not doing my job or if I talk about it then I'm going to get negative repercussions and people will view me differently'.* (Sharon)

17. *You know we're all terrified of [complaints] aren't we...I do think there's a massive culture of fear around [student evaluations]...it does limit the creativity* (Helen)

There are echoes here of risk aversion that characterises pedagogic frailty, with active decisions to adopt a 'safer' approach to teaching as a result of the fear of repercussions.

### ***Strategies to manage concerns***

The lecturers spoke at length about the steps they take to manage concerns about student distress and complaints. Nearly all of the participants explained that they always preface the teaching of sensitive material with a disclaimer, so that students are aware that the material may be potentially upsetting:

18. *With the super-sensitive subjects, at the beginning you say what you are going to be talking about, and if someone doesn't feel comfortable with that, then they obviously can leave the room.* (Rebecca)
19. *So I give them disclaimer at the beginning, and say that if anything does cause offence, you know, just to make me aware.* (Nicola)

In addition, there was also evidence of lecturers choosing not to adopt some of the teaching techniques that they would use with the teaching of more benign subjects. In particular, lecturers adopted an 'opt in' policy, where students might not be required to contribute to discussion, provide an example from their own experience, or to write about a sensitive topic for an assignment:

20. *If you were doing a sensitive topic you wouldn't...you wouldn't force it to become a compulsory topic, for example as an assessment.* (Lisa)
21. *I would never, ever ask them for a situation... I would never ever do that with race, or gender... so I do teach it differently.* (Clare)
22. *I can imagine if, um, if it was non-sensitive I would try to make everybody speak and try to*

*engage everybody. If it's sensitive then I would be more careful if they feel comfortable speaking about this.* (Victoria)

Penny also discussed how she consciously signposts students to further sources of support when teaching mental health topics:

23. *I did also put in the notes, kind of a recommendation to talk to their personal tutor if anything kind of struck home about these things, 'If you realise that actually you are worried about yourself or somebody else, and to that extent then please talk to someone or see your GP or recommend that they do that'.* (Penny)

A further strategy adopted by all of the participants was to ensure that they were particularly vigilant to signs of potential stress in students, both verbal and non-verbal. Rebecca and Alice, both Health Psychologists, explained how they were constantly seeking signs of student discomfort, and described the actions they would take, whilst maintaining discretion:

24. *You have to have emotional intelligence to read the room with some sensitive subjects. If you see someone getting agitated or uncomfortable, you can just call a toilet break and take them to one side.* (Rebecca)

25. *I'm really aware of... of people looking particular ways in the audience. So I can see that someone will be looking at me, looking a bit upset or a bit tearful or something like that and then I try and change the tone.* (Alice)

Participants also explained how they ensured that they retained an awareness of the individuality of students in accommodating for issues that might arise. They clearly recognised that each student would bring to the class a unique personal history, and whilst it was not possible to know each student's background, being sensitive to diversity was a useful strategy to minimise students' distress:

26. *Keeping in mind that each person has a different history... background and knowledge*

*and they're obviously going to bring that with them when they learn the different things.* (Sharon)

27. *I think throughout when you're dealing with such controversial topics it's also important that you don't show bias to students.* (Nicola)

### **Psychological literacy**

The perspectives presented thus far are clear in showing that lecturers hold concerns about the teaching of sensitive material, and enact a variety of strategies to mitigate against student distress and complaints. However, a very clear message came across from each and every one of the participants: that exposing students to sensitive topics is an important part of developing psychological literacy. Alice's justification for exposing herself to the potential risks of teaching sensitive material was simply '*... because sensitive topics are just life really*'; other participants explained in more depth why, in their view, sensitive topics are a crucial part of a psychology education. Interestingly, there was a sense that protecting students from potentially upsetting material would be doing them a disservice, and would limit their ability to apply their psychological training in practice, and to fully participate in society:

28. *Oh I think they need to be aware. I think it does give them a better stance on why people act the way they do. I think it's something they need to consider when they're participating in the world.* (Clare)

29. *I think that it's important that the students understand [sensitive issues] as best we can or... or understand what psychologists currently know about them. I mean I think that ... any psychology education that doesn't cover things that are sensitive or personal isn't... covering all of psychology.* (Penny)

30. *Well, it's a reflection of the real world isn't it? I mean, they're not going to be able to opt out of engaging with stuff that provokes them when they leave these hallowed halls. Part of them leaving here as autonomous, critically thinking, individuals, um, is that they do*



*have to be able to engage with material that is gonna provoke them. And some of that will be personally provocative.* (Helen)

Another justification for the importance of exposing students to sensitive material emerged as the importance of raising awareness of issues such as mental health, and ensuring that these topics receive open discussion and attention, rather than 'shying away' from covering the material. In this way, the lecturers could be seen to be modelling the importance of giving voice to marginalised groups, which might represent an important dimension of students' psychological literacy:

31. *You know I think sometimes we kind of gloss over things. And actually I think people find that more offensive and more upsetting. Because if it directly relates to you or your group then actually you...want it to be... people to understand. I think where it goes wrong is where people maybe touch on it too superficially and that's where you're potentially going to cause more offence.* (Lisa)

A further dimension of this justification emerged in discussion of some students' willingness to share their own experiences. Some lecturers explained how students had been very keen to tell the class about their own mental health issues. For the students concerned, this afforded the opportunity to act as an 'ambassador' and to share the importance of raising awareness and dispelling myths and misconceptions:

32. *I had probably three or four students come up to me at the end of the lecture and one of them said yeah I've had an eating disorder for a long time actually, you know, and I was thinking 'Oooh! Crap!' Um, but she was, you know, she was comfortable talking about it in front of her peers.* (Helen)

33. *One student was happy to talk about her experience of panic attacks and then another student kind of highlighted how it was different for them so I think that's quite good cos it, it*

*brings that kind of individual level...I've had it before where somebody who has had an eating disorder in the past wanted to do more because she felt that, um, quite often what is written in text books doesn't really capture what it feels like to have the illness.* (Lisa)

There was also a recognition within participants' narratives that many of the topics we might define as sensitive are also those which students are most interested in, and so represent an important part of their psychology education:

34. *And partly it's... you know it's as I say something which drew a lot of students to study psychology so they're hungry for information and understanding – even if it's difficult or challenging for them to think about.* (Penny)

Interestingly, Victoria also reflected on the common link between topics that are sensitive, and those that have relevance to students' own lives. She expressed how this increases the extent to which students can bring 'themselves' to their learning of the topic:

35. *I found that mental health stigma is one of the topics students are really interested in. I mean they're psychology students so they kind of have a natural tendency to like the clinical stuff. The more relevant it seems to their lives the more they are interested in that and the more they also have read or heard something somewhere else and can engage.* (Victoria)

Victoria's reflection aligns with the findings from the ranking activity (see Figure 2). Perhaps unsurprisingly, social, developmental, and individual differences psychology were rated as the most sensitive of the areas of psychology covered in an undergraduate degree. However, what is particularly apparent from Figure 2 is that there is close alignment between the extent to which a topic is seen as being sensitive, and the extent to which that topic holds real-world application. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the development of

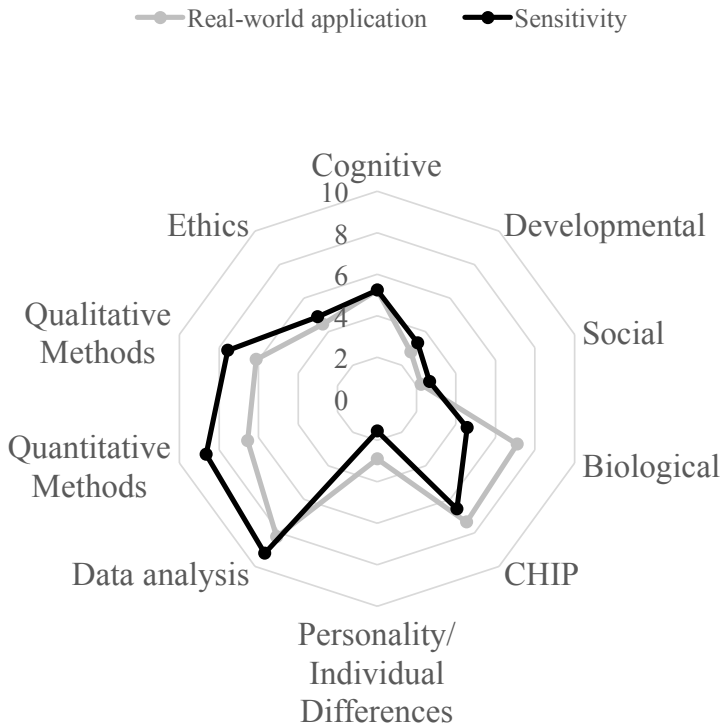


Figure 2: Mean ranks for the real-world application and sensitivity of each of the core areas of an undergraduate psychology degree. A rank of 1 represents the most, and rank of 10 the least sensitive/applicable to the real world.

students’ psychological literacy emerged as a clear justification for the teaching of sensitive topics, in a way that seems to mitigate some of the concerns raised.

**Links between themes**

In order to consider how the four themes emerging from the analysis relate to one another, we constructed a concept map (see, e.g., Novak, 2010) to represent their interdependence. This process led us to propose that psychological literacy acts as an antidote to the potential frailty that might arise from the concerns experienced in the teaching of sensitive topics. Figure 3 represents our mapped links between the first three themes (i.e. excluding the theme of Psychological Literacy): Learning Environment, Concerns, and Strategies to Manage Concerns. The exploration of sensitive topics

in teaching raises concerns, and dealing with these concerns requires management strategies that inform the design of the learning environment, in order to recognise the potential sensitivity of the material to be covered. As expressed by many participants, the concerns raised by the potential impact of teaching sensitive material (student complaints, distress, disclosure) led them to adopt particular strategies (e.g. giving disclaimers; opt-in approaches) to minimise negative outcomes, but also led them to take a more risk averse approach to their teaching. We can therefore argue that this serves as evidence of vulnerability to frailty. We would also argue that Figure 3 represents a reactive approach to teaching sensitive material; it is the sensitive material itself that is driving pedagogic decision-making, rather than the discipline itself and the

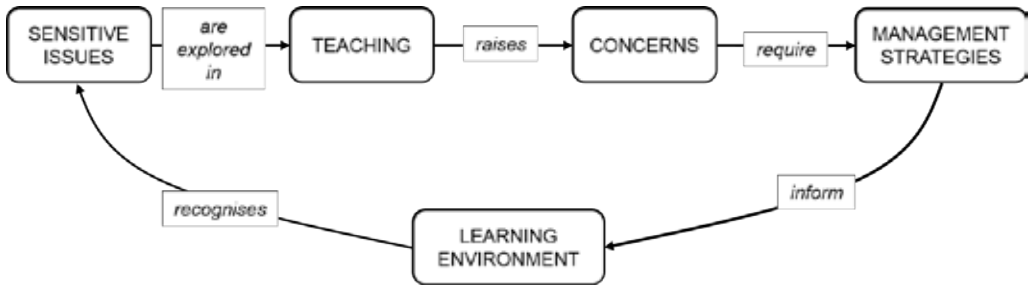


Figure 3: Concept map representing the links between the themes emerging from the analysis, excluding psychological literacy.

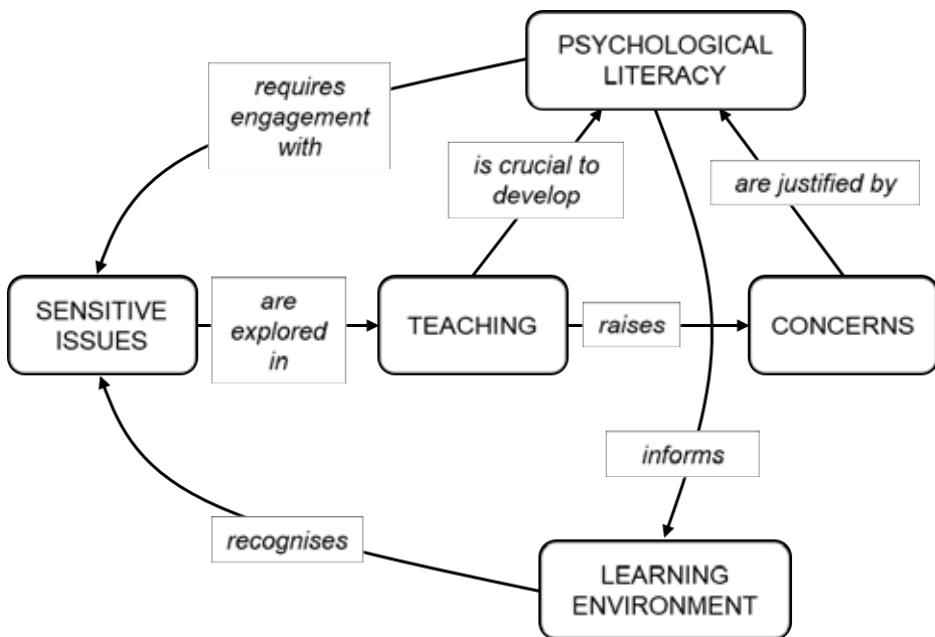


Figure 4: Concept map representing the links between the themes emerging from the analysis, incorporating psychological literacy.

synergy between pedagogy and discipline.

When incorporating the theme of psychological literacy into our concept map (Figure 4), we see a very different driver of pedagogic decision making. Because the development of psychological literacy, according to our participants, *requires* students to engage with sensitive material, the sensitive material itself becomes a vehicle for, rather than a driver of, pedagogic practices.

Because the importance of developing

psychological literacy justifies the potential ‘risks’ of exposing students to sensitive topics, the concerns are legitimised; students need to experience the discomfort that the material might provoke. Furthermore, our participants expressed that when viewed through the lens of psychological literacy, the risks and concerns associated with *not* exposing students to sensitive material are, by some, perceived to have more serious implications than those associated with

teaching such topics. The other outcome of psychological literacy driving pedagogic practice is that psychological literacy directly and proactively informs the design of the learning environment ('what do we want students to *do* with the material we cover?'), rather than the learning environment being informed by reactive 'strategies' to mitigate concerns. In Figure 4, the Learning Environment recognises sensitive issues *because they are important*, not because they need to be managed.

Arguably, Figure 3 represents an educator with a greater potential to exhibit frailty either because: (a) her model is duplicated among her colleagues so that the teaching team as a whole is not employing a stabilising influence of psychological literacy across their teaching; or (b) her model is at odds with her colleagues (who do acknowledge psychological literacy) so that her teaching is 'out of step' with the conventional wisdom of the department. In Figure 3, the learning environment has to recognise sensitive issues, because this is a way of managing the concerns that arise from consideration of the potential implications. Any strategies put in place are in reaction to these concerns. Through the inclusion of psychological literacy in their discussions (Figure 4), our participants were able to express an underpinning values literacy, shaped by psychological literacy, that drives their belief in the importance of teaching sensitive material. This is a clear example of how an integrative disciplinary concept (of which psychological literacy is arguably a paradigmatic example) offers the potential to 'buffer' against frailty (Winstone & Hulme, 2017); the synthesis of *what* is being taught with *how* it is taught provides a driving force that unites all elements of the learning and teaching environment.

## Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to explore the strategies adopted by psychology educators when teaching sensitive topics. Our data indicate that whilst the teaching of such

material raises concerns, many strategies are put in place to try and respond to the inherent risks. The risks themselves, it seems, might be offset by the perceived importance of sensitive material in the development of students' psychological literacy. But how might psychological literacy as an organising concept that integrates discipline and pedagogy buffer against frailty in the context of teaching sensitive material? We consider this issue by returning to the two elements of the frailty model that are controlled by the individual, rather than by the institution as a whole (Kinchin et al., 2016): regulative discourse and pedagogy and discipline.

### *Regulative discourse*

As argued by Kinchin et al. (2016), the likelihood of experiencing frailty is increased where instructional discourse (content, sequencing, pacing, and assessment) takes precedence over, and masks variation in, the values and philosophy underpinning the curriculum (the 'regulative discourse'). The 'reactive' strategies we outlined above could be viewed as elements of instructional discourse: educators spoke of considering when in the module the sensitive material is taught (sequencing), and ensuring that any sensitive material is not a compulsory topic of assessment. We are not suggesting that these strategies themselves are inappropriate. Indeed, we saw many examples within our data of the previously cited recommendations for teaching sensitive material (e.g. Finken, 2006; Goss-Lucas & Bernstein, 2005; Lantz, 2010; Russell et al., 2008). Furthermore, many of these strategies are valuable and responsible means of minimising the potential harm to students, thus representing an enactment of psychologists' ethical and professional values. However, we are suggesting that as these strategies are reacting to concerns, such an approach leaves the educator more vulnerable to frailty as they encounter an ever-changing environment.

In contrast, an approach to teaching sensitive material that is primarily driven by

a belief in the importance of psychological literacy clearly illustrates the predominance of a more stable regulative discourse. Here, pedagogic decision-making is driven by the values and philosophy that accompany psychological literacy. For example, we saw clear evidence of educators' alignment with a philosophy where they held a responsibility to expose students to sensitive material, in order to normalise a topic and encourage open discussion and communication about the topic (Preston, 2013). Where a more established regulative discourse provides a firm foundation for robust instructional discourse, an individual may be less vulnerable to frailty because, upon experiencing a volatile environment, the values and philosophy drive adaptation to the new circumstances (Kinchin et al., 2016; Winstone, 2017).

### ***Pedagogy and discipline***

Psychology is, arguably, one of only a handful of academic disciplines with a clearly articulated concept that integrates discipline with pedagogy. Whilst there is still work to be done in order to refine the scope of psychological literacy, and to fully embed the principles within curriculum design and assessment, the concept has strong potential to bring values to the forefront of psychology education (Winstone & Hulme, 2017). When these values drive pedagogic decision-making, content becomes secondary to transferable learning and development, which encourages educators to consider *why* and *how*, rather than *what*, they are teaching. The very process of engaging with sensitive topics is a way of further developing students' psychological literacy, by surfacing discussion around the kinds of professional values that drive the work of professional psychologists. One good example of such a professional value is working within the boundaries of one's competence (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). We saw in our data, for example, how Penny did not step beyond the boundaries of her own professional competence, by signposting students to sources of

professional support if they were distressed by any of the material they were covering. This behaviour then becomes more than a strategy to minimise harm; it is in itself a teaching event, as students can observe the enactment of professional values.

Engaging with sensitive topics also has the potential to develop students' psychological literacy by requiring them to experience the issues faced by professional psychologists. One illustrative area where professional psychologists deal with sensitive issues is in the area of academic research. Evidence suggests that researchers can be affected, emotionally and physically, by research on sensitive issues (Burr, 1996). It is recommended that when researchers are engaging with participants in discussing sensitive topics, it is essential that they build rapport with participants, make sensitive use of questioning, and ensure that a safe and supporting environment is created (Elmir et al., 2011). Thus, if educators themselves apply these recommendations to the design of their learning environment when teaching sensitive material, they are modelling professional behaviour in a way that develops students' psychological literacy. In addition, participating in research on sensitive topics is in some cases beneficial for the participant, by affording them the opportunity to talk about their experiences in a safe and respectful environment (Elmir et al., 2011). Our data indicate that the same might be true for students; we saw evidence that some students value the opportunity to give voice to their own experiences of what might be considered sensitive topics.

A further area of professional psychology where sensitive issues are frequently encountered is in psychotherapeutic practice. Through the ways in which an educator approaches the teaching of sensitive material, they can again model appropriate professional behaviours, such as the creation of a working alliance, empathy, goal consensus, collaboration, positive regard, and congruence (Kivlighan et al., 2015). This is a clear example of how the topic itself is secondary to the methods of teaching,

whereby the way in which something is taught can have important educational means in and of itself. This approach can reap rewards in equipping students to apply their psychological knowledge to real-world problems, but, as cautioned by Russell et al. (2008, p.414), 'Preparing students to work through the same layers of complexity that thoroughly trained and experienced researchers and practitioners struggle with requires particular attention to classroom environment'. It is crucial to recognise that an educator can do all of these things – pay attention to the classroom environment, be careful with their use of language, build rapport with students, for example – for very different reasons, and not all of these reasons unite discipline and pedagogy. An educator can enact these recommendations in a reactive way, to manage concerns, or in a proactive way, because they wish to explain to students *why* they have taken these steps, and in so doing further develop their students' psychological literacy.

Many academic disciplines face the chal-

lenge of teaching material that may cause distress, for example biology, pharmacology and zoology, to name but a few. It is clear that the potential for student distress is a cause for concern, and can, in some cases, lead to practices that may well be indicative of vulnerability to pedagogic frailty. However, within the discipline of psychology, the concept of psychological literacy has the potential to act as an antidote to this vulnerability, and can serve as a strong driver of pedagogic decision-making.

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