

**Understanding
Trauma:
Conducting a
Trauma-
Informed Title IX
Investigation**



Introduction

Jessica Groleau, Ph.D.

Davidson College, Licensed Psychologist, Coordinator of Clinical Services & Training

Dr. Groleau earned a Ph.D. in Clinical Health Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and joined the Center for Student Health and Well-Being at Davidson College in the fall of 2019. She has conducted research on the impact of trauma in college students, with an emphasis on positive psychology and post-traumatic growth. Her clinical interests include young adult development, working with survivors of sexual abuse and intimate partner violence, LGBTQ issues, relationship concerns, and anxiety.

Session Overview

Why is trauma-informed support important for Title IX Investigators to understand?

- Being part of a Title IX process is inherently traumatic for all parties
- Understanding trauma will facilitate a more accurate and fair investigative process, and help you avoid errors

Topics

- Introduction to Trauma
- Recognizing Personal Bias
- Trauma-Informed Communication
- Promoting Empowerment
- Scenarios & Commonly Asked Questions

Introduction to Trauma



What is Trauma?

Definition of Trauma

- Subjective
- Real or perceived threat
- Manifests differently in each person

Consider each Party's Experiences

- One or both parties have likely already experienced trauma
 - Prior to the incident (childhood experiences, family history, collective memory, etc.);
 - During the incident;
 - As a result of being accused of the alleged incident; or
 - Through a combination of these experiences.
- One or both parties may be currently experiencing trauma during the Title IX grievance process

Neurobiology of Trauma

Brain Stem (“Reptilian Brain”)

- Involuntary survival processes (heartbeat, breathing, etc.)

Limbic System (“Emotional Brain”)

- Regulates the body’s stress response
- Also plays an important role in memory and learning

Frontal Lobes (“Executive Brain”)

- Responsible for cognitive skills including ability to rationalize, plan, self-monitor, and control one’s responses
- Also important for voluntary movement

Human Stress Response

Limbic System Response

- Amygdala (“fear center”) is activated
 - All resources are re-directed toward survival

Disconnection of Frontal Lobes

- Executive functioning goes “offline”
 - Interferes with cognition, voluntary muscle movement, and ability to process the experience later on
- *This is functional and protective!

Human Stress Response

Fight

Flight

Freeze

Fawn (“Appease”)

What does this mean for a Title IX Investigation?

Fragmented/incomplete memories are common

Emotional Dysregulation is expected

- Can appear in a variety of ways: inappropriate affect (laughter), extreme anxiety, numbing/disconnection

The Fawn or Freeze responses may appear to be consent!

Discussing the event is re-traumatizing

- Try to limit the number of interviews, questions, etc.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

10 childhood traumatic experiences that increase risk for:

- Delinquency and dropout
- Teenage pregnancy
- Incarceration
- Mental health concerns
- Chronic illness
- Financial and housing instability
- Early death (including suicide)

Recognizing Personal Bias



Personal Bias

A tendency, inclination, or prejudice toward or against something or someone.

- Biases are universal
 - We are all products of our own personal histories, cultures, and many other factors that shape the ways in which we see the world
 - Biases are automatic and often outside of conscious control
- Biases are not always bad!
 - i.e. an inclination toward healthy lifestyle behaviors
- Biases can be based on stereotypes or inaccurate information
- It is crucial that you understand your biases in order to be most effective in your role

Recognizing Personal Bias

Bias vs. Conflict of Interest

Bias

- Having a personal history with sexual misconduct
- Holding stereotyped gender beliefs about sexual violence (i.e. perpetrators are males)
- Internalization of rape culture (often leads to skepticism or blaming of the complainant/survivor)

Conflict of Interest

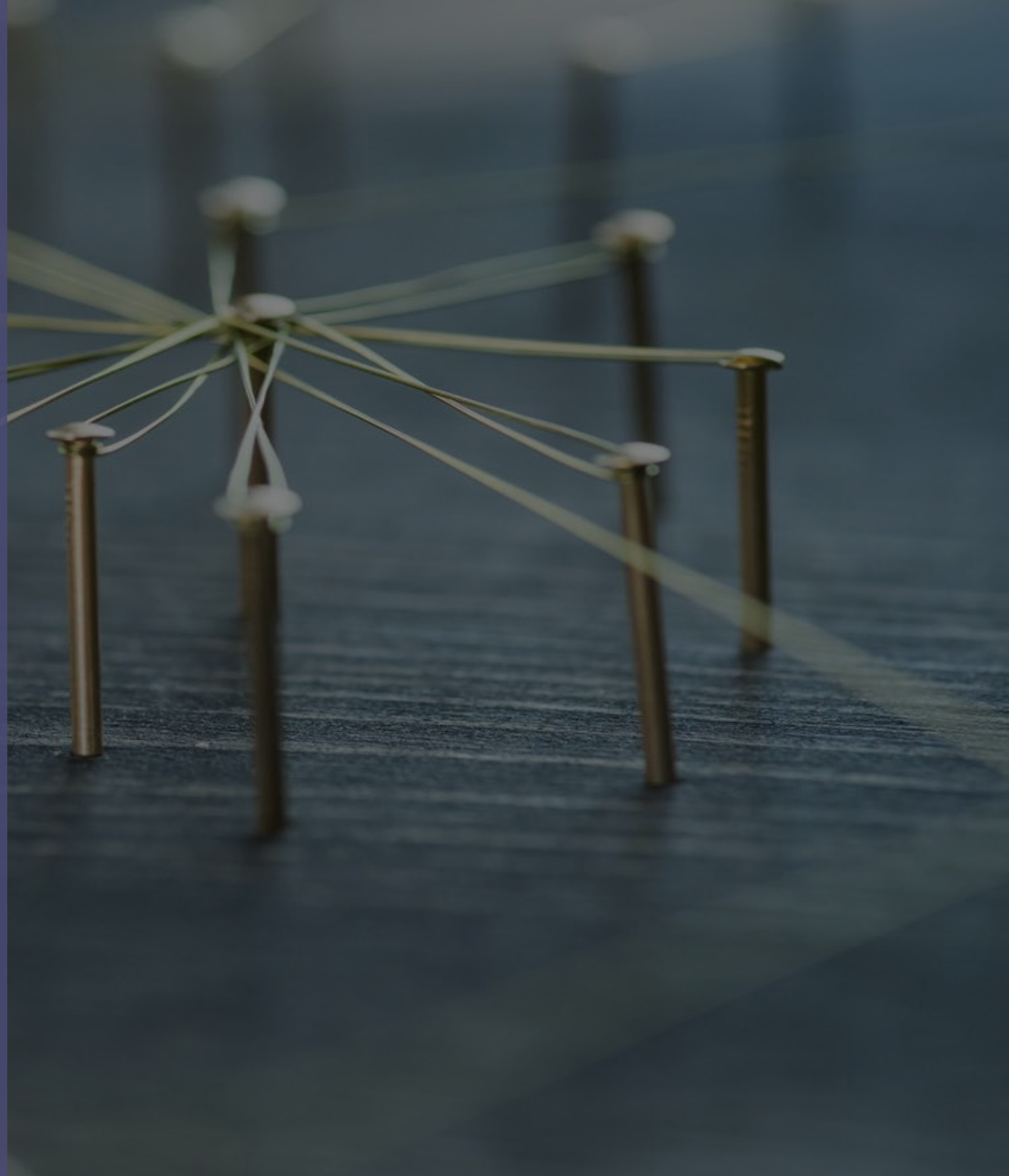
- Having a personal relationship with one or more parties
- Holding multiple relationships with one or more parties
- There is any way in which you could benefit (or be harmed) from the outcome of the investigation

Recognizing Personal Bias

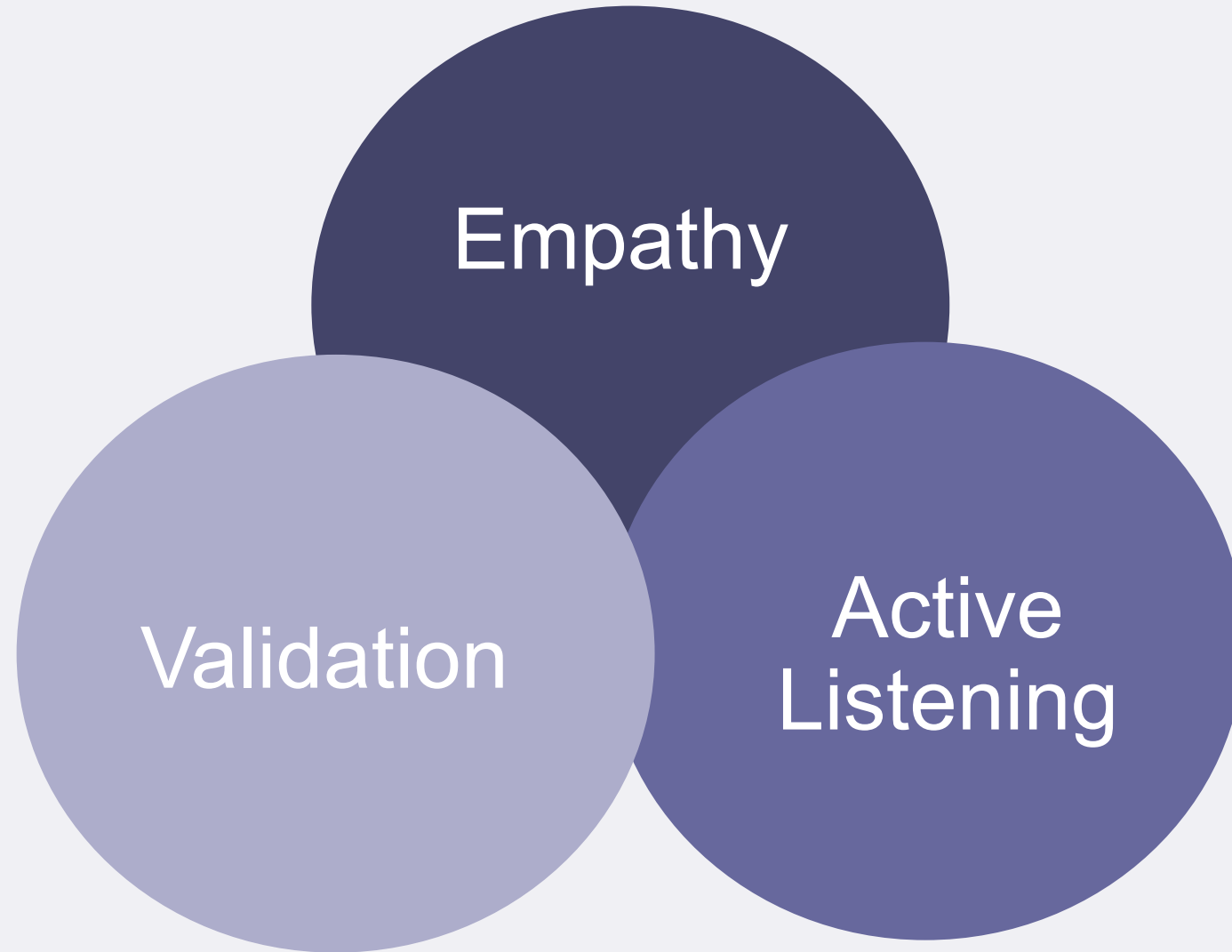
Is personal bias affecting your ability to be objective?

- Introspection
 - Implicit Bias Tests
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>
- Having implicit bias does **not** make you a bad person (we all have it!)
 - Managing your implicit biases will make you a better investigator
- Questions to ask yourself:
 - What does the information at hand cause you to believe about those involved? Why?
 - When should you recuse yourself from a case because you are unable to overcome personal bias?

Trauma Informed Communication



Foundations of a Trauma Informed Approach



Empathy

- The ability to understand and share the feelings of another.
 - Doesn't mean that you fully "get it" – because you don't. But you can try to put yourself in your party's shoes
- Not the same as sympathy!
 - Sympathy is rarely helpful in these situations, most trauma survivors report that sympathy exacerbates feelings of shame/embarrassment

Communicating Empathy

- "I can see how painful this is for you to talk about."
- "That sounds incredibly scary."
- "There are resources here on campus to support you through this."

Validation

Recognition or affirmation that a person or their feelings, opinions, and experiences are real or worthwhile.

Do's

- Share your own similar reactions, if you have them! “I would feel really angry too.”
- “It makes sense that you would feel that way.”

Don't's

- Tell someone how they should feel: “You shouldn't let this bother you so much.”
- Question their responses: “Are you sure that's what happened?”

Active Listening

A communication technique that serves the following purposes:

1. Ensures that you understand what the other person is saying accurately
2. Communicates to the other person that you are listening

Strategies for Active Listening

- Avoid distractions! (Cell phones, emails, knocks on the door)
- Use frequent brief paraphrases of what you heard
- Use nonverbal cues: nodding, smiling or frowning, leaning forward
- Remain neutral and nonjudgmental
- Use phrases to communicate your desire to understand: “Did I understand that correctly?”; “I want to make sure I am hearing you”
- Ask open-ended questions: “Can you tell me more about...”

Additional Strategies

Consider the Environment

- Allow each party to choose the meeting place (empowerment!)
- Consider comfortable seating, tissues, water, privacy, etc.

Focus on each Party & their Needs

- Refrain from sharing own stories & experiences
- Create an open space for them to talk (no judgement)
- Aim to understand each party's perspective

Keep a Healthy Emotional Distance

- Self-care is crucial
- Boundaries are okay (and even healing!)
- Direct each party to campus resources that can provide support

De-Escalation

Confrontation is Possible

- Title IX processes may be intense, and emotions may run high
- Confrontation may occur between you and either party

Strategies for De-escalation

- Keep personal emotions in check
- Create physical space
- Allow for silence & patience for decisions
- Practice validation, active listening & empathy

Promoting Empowerment



Empowerment

Empowerment = Voice and Choice

- What could empowerment look like for each party?

How can you, as a Title IX Investigator, identify resources to help empower each party?

- You need to be neutral/objective, but you can refer each party to other sources of support/advocacy

What may each party consider to be possible obstacles to empowerment? How may you address them?

Tools for Empowering a Party



Ask the party:

- How are you feeling?
- Do you feel safe?
- How can I help you feel safer?
- What do you need right now?
- What do you need throughout the duration of the Title IX process?
- How do you feel about participating in the Title IX process?
- What steps of the Title IX process concern you?



As the investigator, remember:

- Validation, Empathy, and Active Listening
- How can you best support each party & address their needs?

Up Next

**Questions from the
Audience**