

GS915-20 Taboo Topics: Unpicking the silences within global challenges

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Department

Global Sustainable Development

Level

Taught Postgraduate Level

Module leader

Chris Dolan

Credit value

20

Module duration

10 weeks

Assessment

100% coursework

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

Taboo topics and their associated silences and absences are legion in our everyday lives, public and political discourses, academic and policy endeavours. Taboos can: block discussion of underlying logics (e.g. food taboos); prevent disclosure of experiences by those most impacted; stifle exploration and innovation. All, in different ways, distort our evidence bases in ways that may pose major obstacles to global sustainable development and the pursuit of community, engagement and belonging. In the fields of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Trafficking in Persons, State Crimes, for example, multiple taboos result in lack of disclosure and correspondingly incomplete evidence. This hinders effective policy and practice, whether in terms of response and prevention, or going further in pursuit of true accountability.

Despite important theoretical work from anthropologists and others, there has been insufficient attention to how to identify taboos and how to get beyond them in research terms. This module, which explores disclosure-related complexities, obstacles and opportunities thus speaks to cross-disciplinary challenges. Across diverse social and cultural contexts involving academics, practitioners and survivors, it maps key conceptual, practical, ethical and evidentiary issues to be understood and engaged with by researchers, policy makers and practitioners seeking to tackle some of the most intractable challenges of our time.

The module will actively seek to avoid gratuitous use of shock value materials, but many taboo topics - and seeking to challenge taboos - are associated with the possibility of triggering emotions. This module may touch on issues that are difficult for some participants to discuss, and this will require of all participants a willingness to work reflexively in case of such reactions.

Module aims

The module aims to empower students to identify unspoken subtexts within multiple GSD and Community Engagement & Belonging challenges. Although we do teach a range of research tools, as well as metrics for what constitutes 'good research', this module will promote students' capacity to look critically at any existing data, both quantitative and qualitative, while also developing a deep and textured awareness of how to develop interdisciplinary modes of research and analysis that allow taboos to be broken in an ethical fashion.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

The module will address three broad themes, within which a number of indicative topics are outlined:

Theme 1: Defining taboos

- Defining 'taboos': What are the different disciplinary usages made of notions of 'taboo'? do we mean by 'taboo'? Whose taboos matter? What purpose do they serve?
- Taboos, Power & Sustainability: What are the relationships between power structures/dynamics, the persistence of taboos, and our failure to resolve particular global challenges?
- Taboos, Identity & Belonging: Taboos can help generate and maintain a given status quo and thus a sense of identity and belonging; what happens when they are broken?

Theme 2: Taboos & Knowledge

- Taboos & Epistemology: To what extent does an acknowledgement of taboos force a reconsideration of what we think we know?
- Taboos & Data Quality: what questions might we ask of existing data in light of greater awareness of the power and omnipresence of taboos?
- Identifying Taboos: What approaches can be taken to the identification and delineation of taboo topics?
- To what extent do academic disciplines create taboos?

Theme 3: Working on Taboo Topics

- Challenging Taboos: What theories of truth-telling motivate the pursuit of disclosure?
- Strategies for Enabling Disclosure: What comes first? Activism or research or organising? What is the role of evidence in deconstructing taboos?
- Researching Taboos: What particular skills and methods are required for uncovering and articulating previously taboo topics?

Indicative Case studies include: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence; Trafficking in Persons; State Crimes; Child Sexual Abuse; Nepotism & Corruption; Acknowledgement of indigenous populations in settler colonies, Black experiences with cancer (see also draft reading list for a range of other taboo topics related to both global sustainable development and community, identity and belonging).

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Systematically deploy advanced critical thinking skills with regard to gaps, sensing silences, identifying absence
- Interrogate received wisdom and established policy positions through a profound understanding of the qualitative limitations of the data underpinning them
- Recognise, articulate and mitigate own reactions to taboo topics
- Creatively develop, conduct and present ethical research that enables disclosure related to taboo topics

Indicative reading list

Allan, K. (ed.) (2019) *Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Baxter, L.A. and Wilmot, W.W. (1985) 'Taboo Topics in Close Relationships', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2(3), pp. 253–269. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407585023002>.

Caulfield, J., Day, M. and Phillips, B.J. (2021) 'Death in advertising: the last taboo?', *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(7), pp. 1073–1095. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1830687>.

Chrisler, J.C. (2013) 'Teaching Taboo Topics', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 37(1), pp. 128–132. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684312471326>.

Coston, B.M. and Kimmel, M. (2012) 'Seeing Privilege Where It Isn't: Marginalized Masculinities and the Intersectionality of Privilege', *Journal of Social Issues*, 68(1), pp. 97–111. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2011.01738.x>.

Davies, S.H. et al. (2022) 'Adolescent Perceptions of Menstruation on Twitter: Opportunities for Advocacy and Education', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 71(1), pp. 94–104. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2022.01.224>.

Douglas, M. (2002) *Purity and danger: an analysis of concept of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge. Available at: <https://0-www-taylorfrancis-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/books/9781134438242>.

Foucault, M. (2014) *History of Sexuality*. Vintage Books.

Freud, S. (2014) *Totem and Taboo*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform.

Goffman, E. (2009) *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York:

Touchstone. Available at:

<http://0-search.ebscohost.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1975134>.

Grandey, A.A., Gabriel, A.S. and King, E.B. (2020) 'Tackling Taboo Topics: A Review of the Three M s in Working Women's Lives', *Journal of Management*, 46(1), pp. 7–35. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206319857144>.

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Hovey, Angela (no date) 'USING MIXED METHODS TO INQUIRE HOW THERAPISTS ADDRESS

A TABOO TOPIC WITH WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE', 8(5).

Available

at:

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1764690690?parentSessionId=g%2FcfjMqLRIH7In8nBj4LA0DkaBCsOMHMCVWI1ApL%2BUs%3D&pq-origsite=summon&accountid=14888&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.

Kiegelmann, Mechthild (no date) 'Qualitative Psychological Research Using the Method of Voice', 1(2). Available at:

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/867646124?parentSessionId=bysnR0ZAwPgVDMqnTrae8e49%2B90u4v5fe3sGS%2Fp1Oaw%3D&pq-origsite=summon&accountid=14888&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.

Krumpal, I. (2013) 'Determinants of social desirability bias in sensitive surveys: a literature review', *Quality & Quantity*, 47(4), pp. 2025–2047. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-011-9640-9>.

Moyer-Gusé, E., Chung, A.H. and Jain, P. (2011) 'Identification With Characters and Discussion of Taboo Topics After Exposure to an Entertainment Narrative About Sexual Health', *Journal of Communication*, 61(3), pp. 387–406. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01551.x>.

Ouma, M. (2024) 'When the longer route leads to the point: Circumlocution as a strategy in the male reproductive health clinic in Kenya', *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health*, 5.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2024.100420>.

Pierce Colfer, C.J. et al. (2013) 'Gender and natural resource governance indicators: a need to assess and address "sensitive and taboo" topics', *Forests, Trees and Livelihoods*, 22(3), pp. 143–155. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14728028.2013.807143>.

Ronald W. Evans, Patricia G. Avery, Patricia Velde Pederson (2000) 'Taboo Topics: Cultural Restraint on Teaching Social Issues', *The Clearing House*, 73(5), pp. 295–302. Available at: <https://0-www-jstor-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/stable/30189601>.

Rubin, S. (2011) 'Tackling Taboo Topics: Case Studies in Group Work', *Social Work With Groups*, 34(3–4), pp. 257–269. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2011.558824>.

Tomi J. Kallio (2007) 'Taboos in Corporate Social Responsibility Discourse', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 74(2), pp. 165–175. Available at:

<https://0-www-jstor-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/stable/25075454>.

Tracy E. K'Meyer, A. Glenn Crothers (2007) "If I See Some of This in Writing, I'm Going to Shoot You": Reluctant Narrators, Taboo Topics, and the Ethical Dilemmas of the Oral Historian', *The Oral History Review*, 34(1), pp. 71–93. Available at: <https://0-www-jstor-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/stable/4495418>.

Walsh, A. (2017) *Taboo issues in social science: questioning conventional wisdom*. Wilmington, Delaware: Vernon Press. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=5047314>.
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Winters, M.-F. (2017) *We can't talk about that at work!: how to talk about race, religion, politics, and other polarizing topics*. First edition. Oakland, California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=4796047>.

[View reading list on Talis Aspire](#)

Research element

Students will i) identify and delineate a taboo ii) explore how this taboo is likely impacting the ways in which data is collected iii) demonstrate the problematic nature of the resultant data or evidence base, and iii) trace the likely gaps in policy and practice based on that evidence, as well as the impacts of these on sustainability.

Interdisciplinary

This Module will speak directly to the intention of the MASc in Community, Engagement, and Belonging "to help students to critically reflect on where, why, and how to bridge the gap between knowledge creation and communities, creating spaces for dialogue and innovation" and to the MASc in Global Sustainable Development's wish to "combine academic learning with practical action and applied thinking to tackle problems of GSD"

International

While there are some taboo topics that are global, most are context and culture specific. Even those that might be characterised as global will present in context-specific manners. Appreciation of how diverse taboos can be across a range of contexts is a critical component of this module.

Subject specific skills

Identification of taboo topics within existing discourses and disciplines, and identification of methodologies with which to break down such taboos, both for research and for social change purposes.

Transferable skills

The following list utilises the categories of transferable skills developed by the Warwick Award (<https://warwick.ac.uk/services/skills/warwickaward/coreskills/>)

- Critical Thinking - identification and contextualisation of taboos, interpreting data in light of taboos
 - Ethical Values - awareness of unconscious bias in how approach a range of topics, integrity in seeking to break down taboos
 - Self-Awareness - in particular how own reaction to particular taboos may be an obstacle to gaining a clear understanding.
 - Information Literacy
 - Intercultural Awareness
 - Professionalism
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Study

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	8 sessions of 1 hour (4%)
Seminars	9 sessions of 2 hours (9%)
Project supervision	1 session of 1 hour (0%)
Private study	37 hours (18%)
Assessment	136 hours (68%)
Total	200 hours

Private study description

Preparatory reading for lectures and seminars, as well as any preparatory exercises for seminars

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Assessment group A

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
Moving Image	50%	80 hours	Yes (extension)
Students will choose a form they find best suited to their interests – e.g. digital storytelling, arts-based documentary, talking heads, docudrama. For content, students will i) identify and delineate a taboo ii) explore how this taboo is likely impacting the ways in which data is collected iii) demonstrate the problematic nature of the resultant data or evidence base, and iii) trace the likely gaps in policy and practice based on that evidence, as well as the impacts of these on sustainability or on Community-Identity-Belonging			
Conference Presentation of Moving Image Project	25%	26 hours	No
There will be a module mini-conference in the first half of Term 3 . Each student will first give a presentation about their Moving Image project (10 minutes) followed by screening of the project (8 minutes), followed by a peer discussant (5 minutes) and plenary Q & A (7 minutes). Each student is assessed both for their presentation and for their role as discussant.			
Short Essay	20%	27 hours	Yes (extension)
In this essay the student will outline the what they have learned from the experience of developing their Moving Image project for working with and influencing knowledge economies			
Discussant of Moving Image Project of a Peer	5%	3 hours	Yes (waive)
During the mini-conference at which each student will present their project and screen their moving image, each student will also act as discussant of the presentation given by a peer from the same module.			

Feedback on assessment

Students will receive written feedback on all assessments, and will be able to obtain further feedback in person from the instructor(s) upon request.

Availability

Courses

This module is Optional for:

- Year 1 of TIPA-LA9Y Postgraduate Taught Community, Engagement and Belonging (PGDip)

This module is Option list A for:

- Year 1 of TIPA-LA9Z Postgraduate Taught Community, Engagement and Belonging (MASc)

This module is Option list B for:

- Year 1 of TGDA-L801 Postgraduate Taught Global Sustainable Development