What is Betrayal Trauma Theory?

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Short Definitions | History of Terminology | Theory and Research | Some FAQs | References

Short Definitions

The phrase “betrayal trauma” can be used to refer to a kind of trauma (independent of the reaction to the trauma). E.g. This definition is on the web: "Most mental health professionals have expanded the definition of trauma to include betrayal trauma. Betrayal trauma occurs when the people or institutions we depend on for survival violate us in some way. An example of betrayal trauma is childhood physical, emotional, or sexual abuse." from http://www.loyola.edu/campuslife/healthservices/counselingcenter/trauma.html

The phrase “Betrayal Trauma theory” is generally used to refer to the prediction/theory about the cause of unawareness and amnesia as in: “Betrayal Trauma Theory: A theory that predicts that the degree to which a negative event represents a betrayal by a trusted other will influence the way in which that events is processed and remembered." This definition is from: Sivers, H., Schooler, J. , Freyd, J. J. (2002) Recovered memories. In V.S. Ramachandran (Ed.) Encyclopedia of the Human Brain, Volume 4.(pp 169-184). San Diego, California and London: Academic Press.

Also see definitions provided by the Cooperative Online Dictionary of Trauma - http://www.codt.org/

History of Terminology

Jennifer Freyd introduced the terms “betrayal trauma” and “betrayal trauma theory” in 1991 at a presentation at Langley Porter Pyschiatric Institute:


From that talk: "I propose that the core issue is betrayal -- a betrayal of trust that produces conflict between external reality and a necessary system of social dependence. Of course, a particular event may be simultaneously a betrayal trauma and life threatening. Rape is such an event. Perhaps most childhood traumas are such events." Betrayal trauma theory was introduced: "The psychic pain involved in detecting betrayal, as in detecting a cheater, is an evolved, adaptive, motivator for changing social alliances. In general it is not to our survival or reproductive advantage to go back for further interaction to those who have betrayed us. However, if the person who has betrayed us is someone we need to continue interacting with despite the betrayal, then it is not to our advantage to respond to the betrayal in the normal way. Instead we essentially need to ignore the betrayal....If the betrayed person is a child and the betrayer is a parent, it is especially essential the child does not stop behaving in such a way that will inspire attachment. For the child to withdraw from a caregiver he is dependent on would further threaten his life, both physically and mentally. Thus the trauma of child abuse by the very nature of it requires that information about the abuse be blocked from mental mechanisms that control attachment and attachment behavior. One does not need to posit any particular avoidance of psychic pain per se here -- instead what is of functional significance is the control of social behavior."

These ideas were further developed in talks presented in the early 1990s and then in an article published in 1994. A more definitive statement was presented in Freyd's 1996 book. [See refs at end of this web page.]

Betrayal Trauma Theory and Research

Betrayal trauma theory posits that there is a social utility in remaining unaware of abuse when the perpetrator is a caregiver (Freyd, 1994, 1996). The theory draws on studies of social contracts (e.g., Cosmides, 1989) to explain why and how humans are excellent at detecting betrayals; however, Freyd argues that under some circumstances detecting betrayals may be counter-productive to survival. Specifically, in cases where a victim is dependent on a caregiver, survival may require that she/he remain unaware of the betrayal. In the case of childhood sexual abuse, a child who is aware that her/his parent is being abusive may withdraw from the relationship (e.g., emotionally or in terms of proximity). For a child who depends on a caregiver for basic survival, withdrawing may actually be at odds with ultimate survival goals, particularly when the caregiver responds to withdrawal by further reducing caregiving or increasing violence. In such cases, the child's survival would be better ensured by being blind to the betrayal and isolating the knowledge of the event, thus remaining engaged with the caregiver.

The traditional assumption in trauma research has been that fear is at the core of responses to trauma. Freyd (2001) notes that traumatic events differ orthogonally in degree of fear and betrayal, depending on the context and characteristics of the event. (see Figure 1). Research suggests that the distinction between fear and betrayal may be important to posttraumatic outcomes. For example, DePrince (2001) found that self-reported betrayal predicted PTSD and dissociative symptoms above and beyond self-reported fear in a community sample of individuals who reported a history of childhood sexual abuse.
Betrayal trauma theory predicts that dissociating information from awareness is mediated by the threat that the information poses to the individual's system of attachment (Freyd, 1994, 1996). Dissociation is implicated as an important factor in removing threatening information from awareness. We have posited that basic cognitive processes involved in attention and memory most likely play an important role in dissociating explicit awareness of betrayal traumas. Indeed, across several studies, we have found empirical support for the relationship between dissociation and knowledge isolation in laboratory tasks.

Using the classic Stroop task, Freyd and colleagues (Freyd, Martorello, Alvarado, Hayes, & Christman, 1998) found that participants who scored high on the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES) showed greater Stroop interference than individuals with low DES scores, suggesting that they had more difficulty with the selective attention task than low dissociators. The results from Freyd et al. (1998) suggested a basic relationship between selective attention and dissociative tendencies. In a follow-up study, we tested high and low DES groups using a Stroop paradigm with both selective and divided attention conditions; participants saw stimuli that included color terms (e.g., "red" in red ink), baseline strings of x's, neutral words, and trauma-related words such as "incest" and "rape." A significant DES by attention task interaction revealed that high DES participants' reaction time was worse (slower) in the selective attention task than the divided attention task when compared to low dissociators' performance (replication and extension of Freyd et al., 1998). A significant interaction of dissociation by word category revealed that high DES participants recalled more neutral and fewer trauma-related words than did low DES participants. Consistent with betrayal trauma theory, the free recall finding supported the argument that dissociation may help to keep threatening information from awareness. In two follow-up studies using a directed forgetting paradigm (a laboratory task in which participants are presented with items and told after each item or a list of items whether to remember or forget the material), we found that high DES participants recalled fewer charged and more neutral words than did low DES participants for items they were instructed to remember when divided attention was required (item method: DePrince & Freyd, 2001, list method: DePrince & Freyd, in press). The high dissociators report significantly more trauma history (Freyd & DePrince, 2001) and significantly more betrayal trauma (DePrince & Freyd, in press). Similar findings have been found with children using pictures instead of words as stimuli. Children who had trauma histories and who were highly dissociative recognized fewer charged pictures relative to non-traumatized children under divided attention conditions; no group differences were found under selective attention conditions (Becker-Blease, Freyd, & Pears, in press).

Survey research has provided further support for betrayal trauma theory. Freyd (1996) reported finding from re-analyses of a number of relevant data sets that incestuous abuse was more likely to be forgotten than non-incestuous abuse. Freyd, DePrince and Zurbriggen (2001) found that physical and emotional abuse perpetrated by a caregiver was related to higher levels of self-reported memory impairment for the events compared to non-caretaker abuse. Research by Schultz, Passmore, and Yoder (under review) and a doctoral dissertation by Stoler (2001) has revealed similar results.

Taken together, these investigations support the underlying betrayal trauma model. Specifically, betrayal appears to be related to avoidance and dissociative responses that help the individual to keep threatening information from awareness under conditions where the individual’s survival depends upon the perpetrator.

Some FAQs

Is it necessary for the victim to be conscious of the betrayal in order to call it "betrayal trauma"?

The short answer is "no." The following text is from DePrince and Freyd (2002a), page 74-75:

"The role of betrayal in betrayal trauma theory was initially considered an implicit but central aspect of some situations. If a child is being mistreated by a caregiver he or she is dependent upon, this is by definition betrayal, whether the child recognizes the betrayal explicitly..."
or not. Indeed, the memory impairment and gaps in awareness that betrayal trauma theory predicted were assumed to serve in part to ward off conscious awareness of mistreatment in order to promote the dependent child’s survival goals....While conscious appraisals of betrayal may be inhibited at the time of trauma and for as long as the trauma victim is dependent upon the perpetrator, eventually the trauma survivor may become conscious of strong feelings of betrayal.

An important issue for future research is investigating the role the emotional perception of betrayal has in distress and recovery. Is gender a factor?

It appears that men experience more non-betrayal traumas than do women, while women experience more betrayal traumas than do men. These effects may be substantial (Goldberg & Freyd, under review) and of significant impact on the lives of men and women (DePrince & Freyd, 2002b). To the extent that betrayal traumas are potent for some sorts of psychological impact and non-betrayals potent for other impacts (e.g. Freyd, 1999), these gender difference would imply some very non-subtle socialization factors operating as a function of gender.

What is betrayal blindness?

Betrayal blindness is the unawareness, not-knowing, and forgetting exhibited by people towards betrayal (Freyd, 1996, 1999). This blindness may extend to betrayals that are not traditionally considered “traumas,” such as adultery, inequities in the workplace and society, etc. Both victims, perpetrators, and witnesses may display betrayal blindness in order to preserve relationships, institutions, and social systems upon which they depend.

Are demands for silence a factor in not-knowing about betrayal?

In addition to implicit motivations for not-knowing that the betrayed person may have in order to maintain a relationship, the victim may have other reasons for not-knowing and silence. At least one such reason is demands for silence from the perpetrator and others (family, society). Demands for silence (see Veldhuis & Freyd, 1999 cited at What is DARVO?) may lead to a complete failure to even discuss an experience. Experiences that have never been shared with anyone else may a different internal structure than shared experiences (see What is Shareability?).

How do I cite this page?


What are some local pages related to this one?

- Betrayal Trauma: Books, Articles, Presentations
- Measure: The Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS)
- What is DARVO?
- What is shareability?
- What about Recovered Memories?

What do I do if I need support for myself or a loved one?

I am not a therapist myself and I am not able to answer most of the email I get, so writing to me is not likely to help. I am sorry about that. What I do recommend is that you visit David Baldwin’s Trauma Information Pages, and select the “Supportive Information” section there, or go directly to that section at http://www.trauma-pages.com/pg4.htm. The web sites listed earlier on this page are also full of useful links that may help you find the support you are looking for. There are also very useful resources and links provided at the sites of the Sidran Foundation and The Leadership Council of Mental Health, Justice, and the Law.

References


For ordering information and additional books, articles, and presentations on betrayal trauma theory see:
http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/~jjf/trauma.html

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Please note: Due to the large volume of correspondence I receive, I cannot answer most messages.


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