

## Attributes, behaviors, or experiences? Lessons from research on trauma regarding gender differences

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### Lessons from research on trauma

I developed in the mid-1990s, and then taught to undergraduates for some years, a psychology of gender course. I quickly discovered that I had to deal with a substantial number of students entering the course firmly believing that men and women are very different. Some of these students were invested in this perspective and resistant to information that contradicted their beliefs. This *Men-are-from-Mars-and-Women-are-from-Venus* perspective continues to have a toehold in our society. In fact, though, the empirical basis for the essentialism and polarization based on gender is very weak when it comes to psychological attributes such as intuitiveness, sexual desire, scientific ability, or emotional strength. While these and other *attributes* may vary across individuals, the distribution of that variation tends to reveal very small, nonsignificant mean attribute differences between men and women (Hyde, 2005).

While individuals tend not to differ so much due to gender on attributes, research on trauma exposure has made it clear that gender can be a powerful risk factor when it comes to the probability of experiencing specific types of trauma exposure (Goldberg & Freyd, 2006). Research has documented that violence and abuse trauma are not randomly distributed. For example, women are at higher risk of being sexually assaulted, and they are at higher risk than men of experiencing betrayal traumas. Interpersonal and complex trauma can be experienced by anyone, but the risk of having certain types of experiences is raised or lowered by various variables related to societal power and inequity, including socioeconomic status and gender (Brown, 2008; DePrince & Freyd, 2002; Klest, Freyd, & Foyne, 2013).

Trauma research raises awareness of differences in rates of *experience*. It is not only trauma exposure rates that vary by gender: men and women have different risk rates for a host of other experiences from pay inequity to being interrupted when speaking. While this is well documented by systematic research (for gender and also race, age, and so on), it is often denied in society, even within research communities. It is not rare to be told that gender (or race, etc.) is no longer an

issue in how people are treated or in the extent to which they have access to opportunities. These beliefs are not consistent with empirical data but they can be as entrenched as beliefs in essential gender differences. While 20 years ago I was struggling to explain that women and men on average are not that different when it comes to *attributes*, now I struggle with people denying the reality of difference *experience* rates as a function of gender–rate differences that sometimes have medium to large effect sizes. These experience differences have sometimes even been deterministic as when ensconced in law (e.g., when women could not vote or be assigned to a combat position in the military). More often, the experience differences are probabilistic, but sometimes quite large (e.g., the probability a woman will be sexually propositioned by a person in authority). At the same time, except for cases where there are deterministic forces such as laws based on gender, it is important to recognize that even when effects are large, in most cases these effects are probabilistic and thus predict averages – any given individual may have an experience that is not typical based on demographic risk factors.

External experience can be a powerful force on adjustment and behavior and may even influence what we understand to be attributes, such as a tendency to be fearful. This would mean that if women have on average more exposure to certain types of trauma that themselves are risk factors for certain outcomes, then we might pick up attribute differences that are a reflection of experience difference. This is in contrast to an understanding of gender differences as flowing from essential qualities of males and females.

In addition to experiences and attributes, we often measure gender differences in *behavior*. In trauma psychology we see some powerful examples of this, particularly when it comes to the perpetration of much violence, including sexual violence. These gender differences in behavior could themselves reflect underlying attributes and/or experiences. I lean strongly to the viewpoint that the gendered behaviors reflect gendered experiences and gendered socialization. Even when there is a biological disposition for a behavior (whether it is or is not sex linked), the behavior is not inevitable. Arguably, there is a biological disposition to eat sugar and fat when available, to engage in sexual activity, or even to kill other humans; however, these dispositions can be overridden through socialization and effort. The experiences of boys and girls and men and women are likely powerful forces on behavior. When boys are taught to respond to threats with physical aggression, we are more likely to see males be aggressive. When girls are exposed to sexual violence or the threat of it, we are more likely to see females put time and energy into protecting themselves from that violence. In other words, although behaviors may reflect attributes (which themselves may be a function of experience), behaviors are particularly likely to be shaped by experience.

I am appreciative of the perspective on gender differences that I have gained through trauma research. It allows me to recognize both where males and females are more similar than different, and where the external world imposes on average different experiences for men and women – experiences

that may be powerful forces on well-being and perspective. This perspective also inspires my commitment to ending discriminatory practices. If we can find our way to ending interpersonal trauma, betrayal, and institutional betrayal, we will end a vast amount of human suffering and social inequity.

### **State of the journal**

The *Journal Impact Factor* is a product of Thomson ISI (Institute for Scientific Information). JTD's most recent official Impact Factor, released in 2017, is 1.682. This reflects the number of citations in 2016 articles (in ISI-indexed journals) to JTD articles published in 2014 and 2015 divided by the total number of articles published in JTD in 2014 and 2015. This is a healthy result for us, but it should not be over-interpreted, as there are many limitations to bibliometric analyses (Freyd, 2009, 2011). The more important observation is that the Journal is thriving as judged by the submission rate and quality of published articles.

For the sixth year in a row, and with the generous support of Taylor & Frances, we were able to give a cash award for a particularly outstanding publication in *JTD*. Bethany Brand once again generously served as chair of the Awards Committee. The Richard P. Kluft Award for the Journal of Trauma & Dissociation 2016 Best Article was for the article "Shifting the focus: Nonpathologizing approaches to healing from betrayal trauma through an emphasis on relational care," authored by Jennifer Gomez, Jennifer Lewis, Laura Noll, Alec Smidt, and Pamela Birrell. About the article (Gómez, Lewis, Noll, Smidt, & Birrell, 2016), the award committee commented:

This article provides an excellent framework for understanding the complexities of working with survivors of trauma. It successfully describes the danger in pathologizing reactions to extreme stress and discusses an adaptive treatment model, relational cultural therapy, that emphasizes the importance of the relationship when working with survivors. The article incorporates both empirically supported treatment options as well as influences from all spheres of the socioecological model, including the importance of empowerment, in treating individuals who have experienced complex trauma.

In addition, the awards committee acknowledged two 2015 papers for Honorable Mention. One was "Disorganized attachment in young adulthood as a partial mediator of relations between severity of childhood abuse and dissociation" (Byun, Brumariu, & Lyons-Ruth, 2016). For this selection, the awards committee noted: "This study is based on a unique 20-year prospective dataset. It provides important insight into the role of attachment problems in the relationship between childhood maltreatment and adult dissociation." The other was "The impact of dissociation on perceptual priming and intrusions after listening to auditory narratives" (Dorahy, Peck, & Huntjens, 2016). About this article, the awards committee observed:

“This study uses creative methodology to induce dissociation in the laboratory and to measure perceptual priming and subsequent intrusions. This study has the potential to stimulate more innovative work in the causal role of dissociation to the development of intrusive memories.”

*JTD*'s success would not be possible without the dedication and insightful reviews submitted by editorial board, associate editors, and ad hoc reviewers. Thank you reviewers, editorial board, and associate editors – we truly could not do this without you. I am very pleased to welcome to the Editorial Board members for Volume 19 (to be published in 2018) Drs. Petr Bob, Judith Daniels, Brianna Delker, Annemiek van Dijke, Louis Moses, and Lony Schiltz.

I am excited to read your submissions to *JTD* in the year ahead.

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