

Commentary

Avoiding Awareness of Betrayal: Comment on Lindblom and Gray (2009)

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SUMMARY

Betrayal trauma theory (BTT) predicts that unawareness of abuse by someone on whom a victim is dependent may serve to protect a necessary relationship. Lindblom and Gray (2009) contribute to a growing line of BTT studies by measuring narrative detail in a sample of undergraduates who met Criterion A of the PTSD diagnosis and who rated the abuse as their most distressing trauma. Although many core betrayal traumas do not fit Criterion A, Lindblom and Gray found a small effect in the predicted direction. Having found an effect as predicted by BTT, curiously the authors then argue that PTSD Avoidance is a confound for forgetting the abuse to be statistically managed. This is particularly curious since symptom 3 of Criterion C is 'inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma'. Despite constraining participant selection and other methodological issues, Lindblom and Gray's results add support to BTT. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Betrayal trauma theory (BTT) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the impact of interpersonal traumas in which the victim trusts, depends upon, or feels close to the perpetrator (Freyd, 1996; Freyd, DePrince, & Gleaves, 2007). The victim of a betrayal trauma has a profound conflict between the usual need to be aware of betrayal (and thus to confront or withdraw from the betrayer) and the particular need to maintain a close relationship with a significant attachment figure (and thus to maintain proximity and closeness). According to BTT, the victim is likely to respond to such violations by avoiding awareness of the betrayal in the service of maintaining the relationship. Avoidance of awareness may lead to some degree of forgetting of the betrayal trauma.

One testable prediction from BTT is that forgetting will be greater for betrayal traumas than non-betrayal traumas. Freyd (1996) re-analysed a number of relevant datasets and found that incestuous abuse was more likely to be forgotten than non-incestuous abuse. Freyd, DePrince, and Zurbriggen (2001) reported that physical and sexual abuse perpetrated by a caregiver was related to higher levels of self-reported memory impairment for the events compared to non-caregiver abuse. Additional research by Schultz, Passmore,

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and Yoder (2003), Stoler (2001) and Sheiman (1999) has generated similar results. Similarly, Edwards, Fivush, Anda, Felitti, and Nordenberg (2001) reported that general autobiographical memory loss measured in a large epidemiologic study was strongly associated with a history of childhood abuse, and that one of the specific factors associated with this increased memory loss was sexual abuse by a relative. In addition, dissociative tendencies are associated with a history of betrayal trauma (DePrince, 2005; Freyd, Klest, & Allard, 2005). Although there is now a substantial corpus of findings consistent with BTT, there has been some debate about these findings; for discussion see McNally (2007) and Freyd et al. (2007). Clearly more research is still needed.

Lindblom and Gray (2009) report new data related to BTT. What is remarkable about their findings is that, despite a significant restriction in participant selection and controlling for many variables that would be predicted by BTT (e.g. gender, avoidance and non-disclosure), there remains an effect of retrospective reports of closeness to the perpetrator on current narratives of the event. Below we consider important methodological issues that lead to a different interpretation of the findings from the one promoted by the authors. These issues are summarized in Table 1.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION CRITERIA

To be selected for the study, participants had to report a PTSD-Criterion A event that was determined to have been perpetrated by another person (e.g. assault) or accidental (e.g. motor vehicle accident). By requiring participants to have met Criterion A, much betrayal trauma that has been investigated in prior research is excluded. This is because Criterion A in DSM IV TR requires feelings of 'intense fear, helplessness or horror' and that the event itself 'involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others' (APA, 2000). In most betrayal trauma research, exposure to sexual, physical or emotional abuse is assessed. Often such abuse, particularly sexual and emotional, is not life threatening and does not provoke fear, helplessness or horror. In fact, Brown and Freyd (2008) recently proposed that Criterion A be expanded to include betrayal, consistent with a number of studies finding high betrayal predicts posttraumatic symptoms (e.g. DePrince, 2001; Edwards, Freyd, Dube, Anda, & Felitti, 2006; Freyd et al., 2005; Goldsmith, Freyd, & DePrince, 2004). It is important to understand that Criterion A of the DSM IV is not the final word on what constitutes a trauma. The definition of trauma in the field has been actively debated and reconsidered as new research accumulates. As a result, the definition has evolved substantially over the past few decades and this process is likely to continue. Criterion A was revised from DSM-III to DSM IV; similarly the definition of trauma presented in DSM-V (currently in preparation) is very likely to change again in order to reflect current research and understanding.

In addition to satisfying DSM IV Criterion A, participants assigned to the perpetrated-trauma group also had to report that the perpetrated-trauma was the most distressing of all trauma exposures on the life events checklist. Thus, only participants who appraised the events as highly distressing could end up in the perpetrated-trauma group, which likely selected for particular types of events that may not fit past betrayal trauma research; and events for which participants had good enough memory to rate the event as the most distressing.

Table 1. Summary of study features and associated limitations imposed on testing betrayal trauma theory

Feature of Lindblom and Gray study		Limitation on testing BTT
Participant selection criteria	Trauma must meet Criterion A for PTSD of DSM IV	Much betrayal trauma that has been investigated in prior research is excluded, selecting out the most forgettable abuse
	Participant must indicate trauma was 'most distressing' of all traumas reported	Unawareness should actually decrease awareness of distress; thus, events most likely to show unawareness were likely selected against
Methodological and interpretive considerations	Conservative test of BTT	The small sample size and use of BTT-related factors (e.g. gender) as control variables make the test of BTT extremely conservative
	Word count as operationalization of memory	It is not obvious from BTT that memory for betrayals should lead to the use of fewer words
	Operationalization of coding system for details (e.g. 'others present')	The coding system for details may have been biased to find greater detail for close other abuse, particularly in the case of details related to 'others present'
	Using relationship closeness prior to the event to predict current memory	BTT does not require indefinite unawareness. It is not clear that reports of relationships closeness prior to the event should be strongly related to current memory, particularly if victims are no longer in highly dependent relationships
Confounds or predicted effects	PTSD avoidance	Forgetting is part of PTSD Avoidance. Furthermore, BTT predicts unawareness which will include avoidance. By treating avoidance as a confound BTT is being subjected to an unreasonable test
	Conscious suppression of memory and non-disclosure	Attempting to forget and not disclosing abuse are consistent with BTT, not confounds or unrelated memory processes
	Gender	Betrayal trauma exposure is very much associated with gender. Controlling for gender results in an unreasonable test of BTT

This issue of participant exclusion is not trivial, as the closer the perpetrator is to the victim, the more likely grooming and non-violent means can be used to abuse the victim. Thus, many betrayal traumas—arguably the core betrayal traumas that are at the heart of previous investigations of BTT—are excluded from Lindblom and Gray's investigation. That the authors found a small betrayal effect, even while excluding from their study those betrayal traumas hypothesized to be most likely to be forgotten, is noteworthy.

METHODOLOGICAL AND INTERPRETIVE CONSIDERATIONS

Lindblom and Gray predict they will find a significant effect of betrayal trauma on their outcome measures, but then go on to predict the effect will not survive controlling for other variables that they label as confounds. The test is extremely conservative in that the authors require retrospective reports of relationship closeness to predict word count and details above and beyond other factors that appear to have been selected because they most strongly correlated with the same outcomes (e.g. PTSD avoidance appears to have been selected because it related more strongly than the other two PTSD clusters or total PTSD scores). While the authors note that effect sizes for betrayal are small, given the design and statistical methodology it is not clear that large effect sizes would be expected. Further, because of the small sample size for the perpetrated-trauma only analyses, readers must interpret the null effects very cautiously.

In addition to the exclusion of some betrayal traumas as mentioned above, the operationalization of memory 'impairment' may have also influenced effect sizes. In fact, it is not entirely clear that BTT would predict that current disclosure narratives should include fewer words or details, particularly when using overall word counts or general coding strategies. It is interesting these effects were found, but the prediction from BTT is about unawareness of mistreatment from someone the victim is dependent upon or trusts. It is feasible that such unawareness might result in compensatory extra words and extraneous details when giving a narrative. In other words, word counts and extra (but extraneous) detail might or might not correlate positively with memory for the abuse itself.

Although Lindblom and Gray's predictions are interesting, their dependent variables differ from prior dependent variables in this research area, and have not been subjected to any form of validity testing. Any variable is an imperfect proxy for an underlying construct the researcher hopes to study. The degree to which a variable is unable to directly measure the construct it purports to measure (in this case, narrative length and detail as proxies for awareness of trauma) will proportionally decrease the observed effect size. While imprecise measurement is an issue in all studies, it may pose a particular problem to Lindblom and Gray's interpretation of their results. The authors suggest that their results do not support BTT because the effect size is small, although a significant effect was indeed observed in one case. This is problematic given that the dependent variable may not be directly measuring unawareness.

In addition, data from a relatively small number of participants were included in the authors' regression analyses. A regression using only 36 participants and a total of 5 predictor variables requires moderate to large effect sizes for predictors to reach significance. With several possible reasons for small effect sizes, it is notable that relationship to perpetrator predicted additional variance in outcomes above the control variables. The authors focus solely on the change in R^2 without much mention of the individual β s, which can help the reader interpret the size of these effects in the face of low power. Of particular note, the β for relationship closeness is above .20 in both hierarchical models tested, after controlling for other relevant variables that were associated with the outcomes.

We applaud that the authors carefully coded details in the narratives because overall word counts can strip narratives of important contextual information, thus potentially masking more nuanced patterns of data. However, coding alone does not solve these complex problems of understanding context, particularly in relation to BTT. For example, more details were reported for perpetrated- than accidental-traumas, which appear to be

explained, in part, by gender. While the authors tend to characterize gender as a confound, gender points to important processes that likely explain these findings, given that females were more likely both to (1) provide more details about *others present* during the trauma; and (2) report perpetrated-traumas. Any coding system that uses 'others present' in a detail count total will be inherently biased to find more details on the 'others present' dimension for perpetrated-traumas relative to accidental-traumas. Indeed, the authors note that accidental-traumas are often characterized by only the participants (and no others) being involved. Because women are more frequently exposed to perpetrated-traumas, particularly traumas high in betrayal (see Goldberg & Freyd, 2006), the association between gender and details is not surprising given this particular coding scheme. Closeness to perpetrator would also be conflated with information known about the perpetrator, providing another source of narrative detail. The 'others present' code offers a concrete example of why betrayal trauma might, in fact, be associated with greater narrative detail using this particular coding scheme; and for this reason the authors' assertion that BTT would necessarily predict fewer narrative memory details overall as a function of the closeness of the relationship is questionable.

Further, the authors rely on ratings of closeness *prior to the event* to predict *current* narrative detail (which is considered a measure of current memory). Previous tests of BTT (e.g. Freyd et al., 2001) have measured memory in a way that taps both *current and past* disruptions in memory. This is important because the theory does not require that unawareness last indefinitely. BTT focuses on the degree of dependence in the relationship as a motivation for awareness. Presumably, both the degree of dependence on the perpetrators *and* memory for the event change over time. Given that the participants in Lindholm and Gray's sample are now adults attending college, their dependence on and closeness to the perpetrators of their traumas may have decreased substantially from the time of the event, decreasing the motivation for unawareness. Thus it may be that a measure of *current* relationship dependence and closeness would better predict *current* memory for the event, whereas a measure of *past* relationship dependence and closeness would better predict *past* memory for the event.

CONFOUNDS OR PREDICTED EFFECTS?

Perhaps the most important interpretive issue lies in labelling variables as confounds. It appears that the authors' major point is that betrayal traumas do result in less detailed reporting of the trauma, but that processes known to affect memory generally can account for most or all of this difference. They suggest that betrayal trauma is correlated with factors including age at trauma, chronicity/repetition of trauma and symptoms (like avoidance); and that these factors can account for the greater memory deficits observed for betrayal traumas. In other words, their critique of BTT is not in the basic assumption that betrayal traumas will be more likely to be forgotten; but in the assumption that a trauma-specific process not related to age, chronicity or avoidance is necessary to explain it. However, while some of these factors may fairly be considered confounds (like age), others (like gender) may be very much a part of predicted BTT effects and serve as a cause of forgetting at the cognitive level. BTT does not require any special traumatic memory mechanisms; rather it offers a motivation (as opposed to cognitive mechanism) for unawareness and forgetting.

For instance, avoidance—whether defined as PTSD avoidance, non-disclosure and/or conscious attempts to forget—might help cause subsequent forgetting. Interestingly, PTSD Criterion C (APA, 2000) includes forgetting as a symptom of avoidance. From a BTT perspective, avoidance would be predicted to occur more frequently for betrayal traumas; and avoidance might lead to forgetting (Foynes, Freyd, & DePrince, *in press*; Freyd, 1996; Freyd et al., 2007). In Freyd (1996), these issues were discussed in terms of shareability theory—failure to think about or discuss a traumatic event in sharable ways might lead to poor representation of the event, and inability to disclose. By controlling for avoidance as if it is necessarily a confound, BTT is being subjected to an odd test that does not flow from the theory itself.

Conscious suppression of memory detail, which was significantly related to relationship closeness, can indeed lead to forgetting (of any memory). As noted by Freyd et al., 2007: ‘In accord with BTT, we note that the failure to think about events will contribute to poorer memory for the event and that these processes are mediated by the unique demands placed on a child exposed to betrayal traumas’ (p. 295). We are puzzled why Lindblom and Gray suggest a desire to forget is an alternative to BTT for explaining forgetting of high-betrayal traumas. If a medium effect size is found for the relationship between the desire to forget and perpetrator closeness (or, without sufficient statistical power to test this, to the presence of perpetrated as opposed to accidental trauma) then the authors need to explain why it would be that closer relationships are associated with a greater desire to forget the past. The authors provide no alternative (to a BTT) explanation for the medium effect size showing that participants who reported a ‘conscious wish to forget the past’ trauma also reported greater closeness in the victim-perpetrator relationship than those who did not report such a wish.

Like avoidance, gender is another factor that taps the phenomenon itself, but is treated as a confound to be controlled. Women are more often exposed to perpetrated-traumas, particularly betrayal traumas perpetrated by close others, than men (see Goldberg & Freyd, 2006). Because events high in betrayal happen more often to women, controlling for the very nature of these events on the first step of the hierarchical regression removed variance related to the phenomenon itself, adding to the incredibly conservative, if not unreasonable, test of BTT.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Lindblom and Gray have provided valuable new empirical evidence for BTT. Despite a very conservative inclusion criterion (that participants meet Criterion A of DSM IV TR) that would presumably exclude many betrayal trauma survivors, the authors found a small but significant effect for betrayal trauma on narrative detail. While we are puzzled by the authors’ interpretation of factors like gender, avoidance and non-disclosure as ‘confounds’, we appreciate the care taken to look at the relative contribution of numerous variables. With several possible reasons for small effect sizes, it is notable that in a regression using only 36 participants, relationship closeness explained additional variance in outcomes. The β for relationship closeness is above .20 in both hierarchical models tested, after controlling for other relevant variables that were associated with the outcomes. Although numerous aspects of the study would constrain the possibility of finding support of BTT (see Table 1), Lindblom and Gray have made an important contribution by documenting the impact of relationship closeness on narrative detail for betrayal trauma. Future research

is needed to continue to clarify the ways that victims of betrayal trauma avoid awareness of the abuse in service of protecting close relationships.

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