

Interpersonal Betrayal: The Role of Relational Closeness in how Victims Appraise Betrayal

Christina Gamache Martin, Jennifer M. Huss, and Jennifer J. Freyd



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Dynamics Lab
http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/

INTRODUCTION

Background

- The emotional and cognitive appraisal "I've been betrayed" is a complex response to violations of trust.
- Adaptive reactions typically involve strategies that decrease the likelihood of future betrayals (Cosmides, 1989).
- However, betrayal trauma theory (Freyd, 1996) posits that betrayals perpetrated by individuals on whom the victim depends for basic needs (i.e., material and emotional support) are more likely to lead to betrayal blindness—an unawareness of the betrayal—in order to maintain the relationship.

Current Study

- We examined the types of cognitive appraisals made in response to interpersonal betrayals and whether appraisals of the betrayal differed based on the relational closeness of the victim and the perpetrator.
- We asked, is greater relational closeness related to cognitive appraisals that are more conducive to maintaining a relationship, and likewise, betrayal blindness?
- We hypothesized that:
 - Victims in a **current** relationship with the betrayer would be more likely to make appraisals indicative of resignation or indifference.

AND

- Victims who had a **past** relationship with the betrayer would be more likely to make appraisals indicative of growth, on the one hand, or aversion or stagnation, on the other.

METHOD

Participants

- $N = 267$ undergraduate students; 72% female (5% did not identify a gender)
- Age at time of the betrayal ranged from 3 to 27 ($M = 16.07$, $SD = 3.55$)

Procedure

- Participants completed consent and all study questions online.
- Participants were asked to describe an experience of betrayal, including who betrayed them, and their thoughts and feelings both at the time of the betrayal and currently.
- Participants did not self-select into the study based on knowledge of its content.

Coding

- Relational closeness** was coded based on explicit statements or suggestions that the relationship was:
 - Over or in the **past** ($n = 99$) or
 - Ongoing or **current** ($n = 168$)

When the participant did not provide enough information to determine the relationship status, it was coded as unknown ($n = 44$), and these participants were not included in the current analyses.

METHOD (continued)

Coding

- Appraisals of the betrayal** were coded as:
 - Aversive/Stagnant (e.g., violation of rights, punitive other, self-blame, loss, physical threat/danger)
 - "I still somewhat resent her because I thought she would always be there for me." "My father should have taken action." "I'm never trusting him with anything again." "I should've reacted differently."
 - Resigned/Indifferent (e.g., indifferent or unaffected)
 - "That my friends are a little selfish, but what am I going to do about it." "That's just how she is, and I ignore it." "Don't care about it."
 - Growth (e.g., growth or movement towards growth, positive assessment of event)
 - "I deserve better and am working for a change in my life." "I didn't deserve that. Everyone deserves to receive unconditional love and support." "It was a great learning experience."

- Inter-rater coding agreement was 91% for relational closeness and 85% for betrayal appraisals.

RESULTS

A logit analysis, with a simple contrast specified for the DV, was conducted.

IV: relational closeness (past vs. current)

DV: betrayal appraisal (aversive/stagnant vs. resigned/indifferent and growth vs. resigned/indifferent)

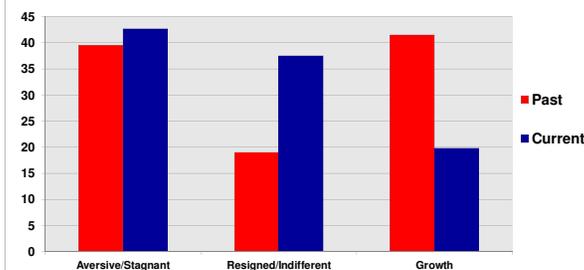
- Relational Closeness:

Growth vs. Resigned/Indifferent ($Z = 3.73$, $p < .001$; Figure 1)

- Past: less resignation/indifference (22.2%) than growth (37.4%)
- Current: more resignation/indifference (37.5%) than growth (18.5%)

Aversive/Stagnant vs. Resigned/Indifferent ($Z = 1.37$, $p = .ns$)

Figure 1. Appraisals of Betrayal by Relationship Status



DISCUSSION

- Victims' appraisals of interpersonal betrayal depend on their relational closeness to the perpetrator via relationship status: past or current.
- Current relationship**—Victims were more likely to resign themselves to or express indifference regarding the betrayal/betrayer rather than grow from the experience, suggesting that further processing of the betrayal to allow growth might not be beneficial for preserving a relationship.
- Past relationship**—Victims made more growth-related appraisals, suggesting that they were able to fully process and learn from the event when the need to maintain the relationship was absent.
- There was no difference in the frequency of aversive/stagnant appraisals made in response to a betrayal by relational closeness.
- These results support betrayal trauma theory, and more specifically, betrayal blindness. Victims in a current relationship with the perpetrator made appraisals that allowed them to be less aware or impacted by the betrayal compared to victims no longer in the relationship, who were more likely to make meaning out of the betrayal and experience growth.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Examine whether aversive/stagnant appraisals of betrayals are associated with psychopathology as has been found in trauma-related studies (Cromer & Smyth, 2010; Martin, Cromer, DePrince, & Freyd., in press), and whether there is a similar relationship between psychopathology and resigned/indifferent appraisals.
- Explore additional factors that lead to appraisals of growth compared to resigned or aversive appraisals. (e.g., Do experiences of prior betrayal traumas influence betrayal appraisals?)
- Conduct longitudinal studies investigating how initial appraisals of a significant interpersonal betrayal are related to future betrayals. (e.g., Are specific aversive appraisals, such as self-blame, associated with subsequent betrayals over time?)

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Please address correspondence to:
Christina Gamache Martin, M.S., 1227 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, gamachem@uoregon.edu
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