



# Institutional Betrayal: Violations of members' trust surrounding incidents of sexual assault



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## INTRODUCTION

Research has documented the profound negative impact of betrayal associated with interpersonal traumas such as sexual assault (Betrayal Trauma Theory; Freyd, 1994, 1997). We posit that the harm of sexual assault may be made much worse by institutional failure to prevent sexual assault or respond supportively when it occurs -- what we call "**institutional betrayal**". In the current study we examined the involvement of institutions (e.g., universities, churches, fraternities) in events surrounding experiences of sexual assault with a novel instrument, the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (IBQ). Specifically we examined the following questions:

- How common is institutional betrayal and what does it typically look like?
- Are experiences of sexual assault exacerbated by institutional betrayal?

## METHODS

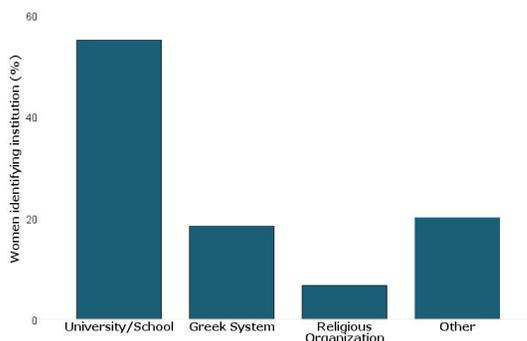
Sample: Using the University of Oregon human subjects pool we collected data from female college students (N=345). Three self-report measures were completed via an online survey:

- Sexual Assault: SES (Koss & Oros, 1982)
- Institutional Betrayal: IBQ (author created)
- Trauma Symptoms: TSC-40 (Briere & Runtz, 1989)

## RESULTS

- 68% of the sample reporting experiencing some form of unwanted sexual experience, with many women reporting several experiences (M=3.06, SD=2.17).
- 46% of women who experienced sexual assault also reported experiencing at least one form of institutional betrayal. As shown in **Figure 1**, a university or related institution such as a residence hall was the most frequently identified institution (56%).
- Over half (56%) of women who experienced institutional betrayal reported no longer being associated with the betraying institution.

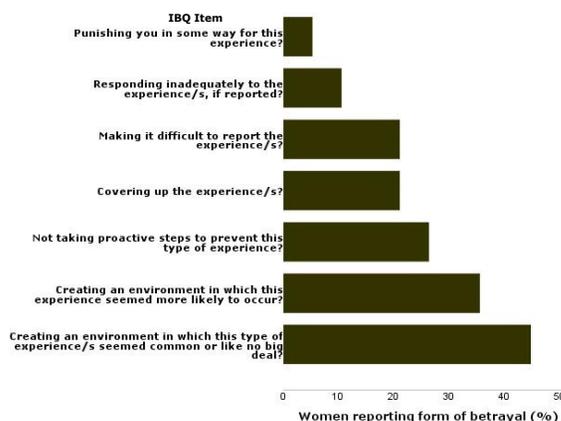
Figure 1. Institutions identified as betrayers



## RESULTS, CONT.

Institutional betrayal was assessed by seven items on the IBQ which asked about the ways in which an institution was involved in events surrounding a sexual assault. **Figure 2** displays these items, along with the frequency at which they were endorsed. Most common was the report that an institution made sexual assault seem common or like no big deal.

Figure 2. Forms of Institutional Betrayal



## RESULTS, CONT.

Institutional betrayal moderated the relationship between sexual assault and **anxiety, dissociation, sexual dysfunction** and **sexual abuse trauma index** symptoms. These analyses were completed by examining a multiple regression containing sexual assault (total SES scores), institutional betrayal (total of 7 IBQ items) and the interaction of these two variables (**see Table 1** for the unstandardized regression coefficients of these four models). Women who reported high levels of institutional betrayal (2 or more items on the IBQ) had stronger relationships between their experiences of sexual assault and trauma symptoms than did women who had not experienced institutional betrayal. This is evidenced by significant, positive interaction terms for each model.

Table 1. Exacerbative effects of Institutional Betrayal

	SATI (R <sup>2</sup> = .17)	Anxiety (R <sup>2</sup> = .10)	Dissociation (R <sup>2</sup> = .11)	Sexual Dysfunction (R <sup>2</sup> = .12)
Sexual Assault (SA)	.41* (.10)	.32* (.12)	.35* (.10)	.41* (.12)
Institutional Betrayal (IB)	-.46 (.36)	-.37 (.42)	-.22 (.34)	-.29 (.41)
SA x IB	.17* (.07)	.16* (.08)	.10 <sup>+</sup> (.07)	.13 <sup>+</sup> (.08)

Note: All coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients expressed B (SE)  
\*p<.05, <sup>+</sup>p<.10

## CONCLUSIONS

Institutional betrayal was a common experience among sexually assaulted women. Although a range of institutions were implicated, the most frequently named was a university or college. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the college sample. Betrayal most frequently took the form of complicity in sexual assault – both active (creating environments conducive to sexual assault) and passive (failing to take steps to prevent assault). Experiencing institutional betrayal was associated with appreciably negative outcomes. Women who experienced institutional betrayal frequently reported leaving these institutions which were considered important in their lives previously. Additionally, in keeping with Betrayal Trauma Theory, women who experienced institutional betrayal also reported more severe trauma symptoms following sexual assault.