

AWARD

APF Gold Medal Award for Impact in Psychology: Jennifer Joy Freyd



Citation

“Jennifer Joy Freyd is recognized for her trailblazing research and advocacy, which has reshaped the understanding of trauma, betrayal, and responses to sexual violence. Her theory of betrayal trauma challenged prevailing assumptions, particularly regarding survivors of child sexual abuse. Dr. Freyd’s resilience and commitment to justice have inspired countless individuals worldwide and influenced therapeutic approaches, policy reforms, and societal attitudes toward trauma and gender-based violence. Dr. Freyd has also served as a prominent figure in significant social movements that empower victims, such as #MeToo. Through initiatives like the Center for Institutional Courage, she continues to advocate for survivors’ rights and promote ethical research practices, aiming for a more equitable society where survivors find validation and healing.”

Biography

Early in her career, Jennifer Joy Freyd was often pressed on the question of whether her field of research was “perception” or “cognition”—a distinction that was important in the early 1980s. A decade later, she caused alarm by being a cognitive psychologist who studied trauma—at the time, a significant category violation. Freyd’s refusal to fit into existing categories in psychology was foreshadowed

during her childhood and youth—a time that involved traveling to many countries around the globe and living for periods in Iran, Switzerland, Australia, and Japan—when her first career ambition was to be an ice-skating belly dancer. When not living abroad, she attended Friends Select School in Philadelphia where, coming to her senses, Freyd decided her career would result in her becoming a U.S. Senator after first being appointed as a judge so as to adjudicate wisely in cases involving abused children.

At age 16, Freyd began her undergraduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where she declared three different majors (Philosophy, Fine Arts, and Anthropology) in quick succession. Then as a junior in college, Freyd took her first psychology course, quickly falling in love with the topic. Upon graduating from college in 1979, she went to Stanford University to work with cognitive psychologist, Roger Shepard, after being awarded a National Science Foundation graduate fellowship.

As a graduate student, Freyd proposed three conceptual frameworks related to human cognition: shareability, dynamic mental representations, and representational momentum. She initiated a program of research based on these ideas that kept her busy for the next decade. While Freyd was a graduate student, every article she submitted for publication was initially rejected, often on the grounds that the ideas were wrong because they went against “known” psychological facts. However, those initially rejected articles, subsequently accepted and published, continue to be among her most highly cited works. After receiving her doctorate in 1983, Freyd began as an assistant professor at Cornell University, where she worked for 4 years.

In 1987, Freyd was recruited by the University of Oregon with an offer of a tenured position at the rank of associate professor. She was promoted to full professor 5 years later and, except for sabbaticals and fellowships, she stayed at Oregon until 2021 when she was appointed professor emerit of psychology. (*Emerit* is not a typo—it is a term Freyd advocated for herself and her colleagues, as it seemed to her problematic to force a gender label on retired professors.) Also in 2021, Freyd and the University of Oregon settled a precedent-setting equal pay lawsuit. At the time she filed the lawsuit, Freyd explained:

The pay inequity I have experienced is very painful and I do not want the women I have mentored, my current and many former graduate students, my own daughter in graduate school, or the junior faculty we

have hired in the Department of Psychology to go through what I've gone through.

After the case was revived by the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and subsequently settled, she commented: "This is not just a victory for me. It sends a strong message of support to so many women who continue to struggle against pay discrimination."

During Freyd's years at the University of Oregon, she developed several theories that inspired new subfields of research, which are still developing today. Those concepts include betrayal trauma, betrayal blindness, institutional betrayal, and institutional courage. While these concepts have become integrated into scientific, clinical, and policy domains, her efforts in the early 1990s to present betrayal trauma theory were met with considerable resistance. This backlash informed Freyd's development of the concept of DARVO—an acronym (from deny, attack, reverse victim, and offender) that refers to a reaction that perpetrators of wrongdoing may display in response to being held accountable for their behavior. DARVO is a conceptual tool, backed by empirical research, that has become influential across responses to domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and beyond. Celebrities involved in the #MeToo movement adopted the term. It was featured in the 2019 season finale TV show *South Park*, and it frequently is used in public conversations about interpersonal and institutional harm.

Along with developing and testing these theories, Freyd and her students pursued additional empirical and theoretical projects including measurement development, the ethics of trauma research, and alternatives to the problematic use of campus mandatory reporting policies. Her work measuring and addressing campus sexual violence led to retaliation in the local press from some administrators at her own university, and nonetheless, the research was ultimately impactful both locally and more broadly.

While circumstances sometimes required Freyd to be brave in ways that were not typical for a professor, she also engaged in the usual activities of a productive scholar. The author or coauthor of over 200 scientific articles and commentaries, Freyd is also the author of the Harvard Press award-winning book *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*. Her book *Blind to Betrayal*, coauthored with Pamela J. Birrell, was published by John Wiley and has seven additional translations. Freyd also served as the editor of the *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* from 2006 through 2023, helping substantially raise the profile of that scholarly journal while also shaping the field, including by publishing annual special issues that pushed the trauma field into new domains.

Freyd's trauma theories have helped transform the field from one focused on the role of physically terrorizing events to one that takes seriously the role of betrayal and interpersonal trauma at individual, institutional, and cultural levels. Her early trauma research in the 1990s advanced the

field's understanding of memory for trauma, particularly memory impairment. With the introduction of betrayal trauma theory, Freyd made a persuasive case for the role that social betrayal plays in how victims process trauma. In particular, she argued that greater dependence in the victim–perpetrator relationship would be linked with unawareness and forgetting of abuse, as these responses protected relationships that the victim experienced as necessary to survival. In the nascent trauma literature of the 1990s, Freyd's focus on social betrayal, and the relationship between attachment, trauma, betrayal, memory, and harm, was revolutionary.

In the years since, the core predictions of betrayal trauma theory have withstood rigorous testing as the theory has been applied to a growing number of trauma-related problems beyond posttraumatic stress disorder and memory impairment. What may be less obvious is how Freyd's work on betrayal trauma theory ignited discoveries around the very nature of trauma and its harms. For example, betrayal trauma theory galvanized research into the correlates of betrayal traumas, documenting a host of physical and psychological as well as relational and cognitive harms that varied as a function of betrayal in the victim–perpetrator relationship—at a time when the field's attention was quite narrowly focused on posttraumatic stress disorder. Freyd's early work also radically changed the field's understanding of the gendered nature of intimate violence and abuse. Through betrayal trauma theory, Freyd offered a theoretical framework through which scholars nationally and globally began to test and understand more about how the characteristics of trauma shaped responses to those events, including reactions beyond fear, such as alienation, betrayal, and shame. Guided by tools that Freyd and her colleagues developed, such as the Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey, the field's understanding of betrayal trauma has grown exponentially.

Across her career, Freyd has continued to be an innovator in the field of trauma psychology. Starting about 2 decades ago, her theoretical and empirical work evolved to identify the ways that entire institutions can betray the people who depend upon them. For example, institutions such as colleges and universities sometimes create conditions where campus sexual assault is likely to occur or cover it up when it happens. Churches and businesses sometimes close ranks to protect abusive actors in their midst, sacrificing those who were victimized. Freyd and her colleagues defined and then demonstrated that this institutional betrayal adds significantly to the harm of experiencing trauma. After documenting the harm of institutional betrayal, Freyd and her students offered and tested an antidote: institutional courage—measurable actions, policies, and procedures that promote equitable, peaceful environments that prevent and address violence, discrimination, and myriad other harms.

In January 2020, Freyd founded the Center for Institutional Courage, a nonprofit dedicated to transformative research

and education about institutional betrayal and how to counter it through institutional courage. Freyd is currently serving as the president of this nonprofit. She is also currently an affiliate professor of both Psychology and Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington.

In addition to her scholarship, Freyd has provided much leadership to her community while also being a lifelong activist for various social justice causes, including those that address sexual violence. For example, from 2019 to 2023, Freyd was a member of the Advisory Committee of the Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education, National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. And in recognition of her service to the University of Oregon, Freyd received from the University of Oregon Senate the Wayne T. Westling Award for University Leadership and Service.

One of Freyd's greatest joys in her professional life has been the opportunity to mentor and learn from many fantastic graduate students. It is perhaps no surprise that scholars mentored by Freyd are at the leading edge of current conversations about the psychology of trauma. Freyd has mentored and launched the careers of an entire generation of scholars who think deeply about the sociopolitical context and implications of their work and now seek to evoke that same deep thinking in their own students. Given Freyd's commitment to mentoring and investment in developing the next generation of leaders in the field, it is fitting that Freyd's students are department chairs (at least three and counting so far) as well as leaders in national organizations. In recognition of her commitment to her students, the University of Oregon awarded Freyd with its Excellence Award for Outstanding Mentorship in Graduate Studies.

As noted above, Freyd experienced backlash and retaliation, requiring from her both focus and bravery. At one point her lab was even picketed for a week by an angry man she did not know. Retaliation is difficult to withstand, but it helped Freyd enormously to have a supportive partner, children, friends, and community. Freyd has also been graced with acclaim for her scholarship and her courage. Her awards include being named a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow, an Erskine Fellow at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. She has received a National

Science Foundation Presidential Young Investigator Award and an National Institute of Mental Health Research Scientist Development Award. The International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation selected Freyd for the Lifetime Achievement Award. Freyd was twice a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. Freyd received the Christine Blasey Ford Woman of Courage Award, Association for Women in Psychology, 2021, and Claremont Graduate University selected Freyd as their 2024 commencement speaker and in May 2024 conferred on Freyd an honorary doctorate degree.

Although Freyd now lives in Seattle, Washington, she found Eugene, Oregon, a wonderful place to raise a family, which Freyd and her partner, the late JQ Johnson, did with much enthusiasm. Together they raised three fabulous children who are now fabulous adults, Theodore Johnson-Freyd, PhD, Philip Johnson-Freyd, PhD, and Sasha Shen Johfre, PhD. Freyd is also delighted to be a grandparent.

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