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on acid-free paper by The Cromwell Press
Bath, UK
0959-3535

II. Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness and Betrayal Trauma Theory

Jennifer J. FREYD

Interpersonal power. Who has it? Who doesn't have it? What happens when power is used to abuse? These are central questions for feminist psychology. Implicit in these considerations of power are questions of interpersonal trust and betrayal: who trusts whom, and why is trust required? What happens when trust is betrayed? How does interpersonal power influence interpersonal trust? How does a person respond when a more powerful person betrays?

Interpersonal power, interpersonal trust and betrayal are also fundamental components of betrayal trauma theory (Freyd, 1994, 1996). Betrayal trauma theory addresses the motivations for, and mechanisms resulting in, amnesia for childhood abuse. In this article I will briefly summarize some aspects of betrayal trauma theory (focusing mostly on the motivations, not the mechanisms). I will then discuss some issues relevant to feminist psychology.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

While betrayal trauma theory is not directly relevant to the contested memory debate, any current scientific or scholarly consideration of issues of childhood abuse and/or memory for trauma must contend, at least to some extent, with the social and intellectual context created by that debate. I take the heart of the debate to be fundamentally this: did remembered childhood abuse happen or not happen? This question gets asked about specific recovered memories and about the general phenomenon of recovered memories. While the debate is funda-

Feminism & Psychology © 1997 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 7(1): 22-32. [0959-3535(199702)7:1:1-1]

mentally about whether an abusive event (or events) happened or not, there are many additional issues that are naturally implicated by the intellectual issues central to the debate, and/or insinuated into this debate even if not intellectually necessary (see Brown, 1995; Enns et al., 1995). Furthermore, this current contested memory debate is part of a long pattern of cycles of discovery and suppression of sexual abuse awareness (Herman, 1992; Olafson et al., 1993; Summitt, 1988).

I first began to develop and present an early version of betrayal trauma theory (e.g. Freyd, 1991) before the term 'false memory syndrome' was introduced and before the False Memory Syndrome Foundation was formed. My goal was then, and largely remains now, one of exploring and understanding the phenomena of forgetting and remembering childhood abuse. My approach does not begin with a contested memory (or memories), attempting to determine whether it is (or they are) true or false. Instead my theoretical approach begins with the event of abuse by a trusted other, and then follows the fate of the awareness of, and memory of, that abuse. This is a fundamental difference in starting points. It is somewhat like the difference between starting with lung cancer and attempting to uncover its causes, versus starting with tobacco smoking and trying to uncover its effects on the respiratory system. The perspective generated by the contested memory debate, by analogy, is like the former case: it begins with a reported memory and tries to uncover its roots. Betrayal trauma theory, in contrast, is like the latter case: it begins with childhood abuse and tries to uncover its effects on memory and awareness. Nonetheless, my theory is indirectly relevant to the debate, in that it arrives at an argument for the plausibility of forgetting (and later remembering) actual abuse.

Betrayal trauma theory begins with two assumptions about the current social reality in America: first, that childhood sexual abuse happens; second, that memory for childhood sexual abuse is sometimes impaired, even unavailable for periods of time. The theory does not directly make nor depend upon assumptions about frequencies of these events (nor does it make or depend upon assumptions about the frequencies of false memories). Even if the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse and the prevalence of memory failures were low, the natural history of memory for abuse would be worthy of understanding, because we know there are actual cases of forgetting and later remembering abuse (see, for example, Goleman, 1992; Stanton, 1985), and because individuals are so deeply affected by forgetting and remembering these events. In fact, however, the empirical literature indicates that the prevalence rates in both cases are quite high. Four reasonably large-*n* population studies, each with acceptable methodology, revealed childhood sexual abuse rates in female adults of 19 percent (Finkelhor, 1979), 27 percent (Tinnick, 1985), 25 percent (Kinsey et al., 1953) and 38 percent (Russell, 1986). Thus these estimates ranged from a low of approximately 1 in 5 to a high of approximately 1 in 3 women reporting a childhood history of sexual abuse (definitions of abuse and interview techniques vary from study to study which partly may explain the range). On the second issue, the reality of

memory failure for abuse, four different studies, each with reasonable methodology, resulted in reported rates of some period of forgetting aspects of childhood abuse from 31 percent (Lofthus et al., 1994) to 59 percent (Briere and Conte, 1993); for additional careful empirical studies supporting these findings see also Feldman-Summers and Pope (1994) and Williams (1994a, 1994b, 1995).

It is disturbing to consider together the two sets of findings of prevalence of childhood sexual abuse and prevalence of forgetting. If we use the data reviewed above to estimate that 1 in 4 women are sexually abused, and that 1 in 3 of those women forget the abuse for some period (rates for men are not as well documented), then we arrive at the conclusion that approximately 8 percent of all adult women in the general American population have experienced or are experiencing some memory failure for childhood sexual abuse. This statistic seems on the face of it deeply implausible to many people, and this perception of implausibility may play a role in the current acceptance of the false memory position by some people who are not familiar with the empirical literature. However, not only is the forgetting of abuse a phenomenon of deep importance to the affected individuals, but it is a relatively prevalent aspect of our current social context worthy of understanding. The next questions, then, are how and why does this forgetting occur?

BETRAYAL TRAUMA THEORY

Remembering and forgetting are everyday aspects of human life. Further, knowing is multi-stranded. We may know and not know something at the very same moment. We have different kinds of knowing that can occur simultaneously; we may know how to play the piano, and we may know how playing the piano feels, we may remember learning how to play, and we may be able to explain in words how to play the piano. In this example these different forms of knowing may all be accessible. At other times we may know and not know related material, as when we know how to speak grammatical English and recognize perfectly well when an utterance is not grammatical, but we may not know how to articulate the rules of syntax. Similarly, we may recognize that we feel anxious, but not have knowledge of why, or we may show we are angry by our voice and body posture, but not perceive our own anger at the conscious level. A person may simultaneously know and not know about an abusive event. The nature of such knowing and not-knowing can be understood in terms of what is now known about the mind and brain. Thus, building upon existing knowledge of cognitive architecture, we can now describe how forgetting and remembering sexual abuse or betrayals can plausibly occur.

FUNCTIONS OF PAIN AND BLOCKING PAIN

To explain why people sometimes forget childhood sexual abuse I will consider three issues: the purpose of experiencing pain, the role of attachment in human survival, and the significance of detecting — or not detecting — betrayals. These issues bear on the questions raised at the outset: who trusts whom, why is trust required, what does interpersonal power have to do with trust and the betrayal of trust, and what happens when trust is betrayed.

What is the function of blocking pain? Our intuitions may lead us astray here. It would seem intuitive that getting rid of pain is an end in and of itself. Pain is horrible, so we get rid of it whenever we can. The intuition that we are driven to get rid of pain for the purpose of getting rid of pain has some truth to it in any given event — we are motivated to get rid of pain — but it is also missing a critical aspect of the causal or functional explanation for why we are so responsive to pain: we are motivated to get rid of pain because we are designed to respond to pain as a motivator for changing our behavior.

Most of the time we take actions to make the pain go away. If we are painfully hungry we eat. If we are painfully cold, we cover ourselves. If we are painfully tired, we sleep. In each of these cases we take an action that brings an end to the pain, and that is of fundamental importance to our survival in direct ways. We need food, warmth and rest. Thus, we get rid of pain, in a design sense, in order to stay alive. But what about those times when we do not feel physical pain that would normally be felt? Why would we be designed to block pain? We are, in fact, precisely designed this way; we have an impressive system of natural analgesia (Kelly, 1985). If survival apparently depends upon suppressing physical pain (as in fleeing a predator when injured), we are likely to spontaneously block the pain.

Dissociation during trauma and traumatic amnesia (or 'repression') are commonly understood to be psychological defenses against psychological pain, as if removing pain is a logical end goal. Yet, it would not be adaptive to spontaneously experience pain, either physical or psychological, and then go to great lengths to get rid of the pain merely to be rid of it. Instead, natural systems for blocking pain would be adaptive only if the behavioral consequences of pain in a particular situation are themselves maladaptive. In other words, we are surely motivated to avoid and alleviate pain, but behind that motivation is a goal more related to survival than pain relief per se.

ATTACHMENT AND TRUST

Using newborn monkeys separated from their mothers and other monkeys, Harlow (1959) studied the effects of removing all social stimuli from birth. When normal monkeys were introduced to the isolated monkeys after a year, the isolated monkeys withdrew to a corner or rocked back and forth for hours. If a normal

monkey approached an isolated monkey, the isolated monkeys would sometimes even bite themselves until the normal monkey would leave them alone. The isolated monkeys' problems continued into adulthood. When previously isolated female monkeys were made pregnant through artificial insemination they were not able to then care for their infants properly, generally ignoring the infants, or even abusing or killing the infants when the infants sent distress signals.

The informative, and tragic, studies with infant monkeys, our biological relatives, highlight the importance for humans of social contact and attachment in infancy and childhood. It is now widely recognized that the physical and mental survival of human infants and children depends upon a successful attachment between the child and caregiver (Bowlby, 1969, 1988). Under healthy conditions during the first year of a human's life, while caregivers and infants are responding to one another, the infant and the parents are developing a deep, affectionate, intimate and enduring relationship.

Because attachment is of overwhelming significance to the developing infant and child, a complex system of emotional, cognitive and behavioral components ensures attachment is operative during development. The result of this is that children both trust and love their caregivers and that trust and love motivates the children to display affection toward their caregivers which in turn elicits love, nurturing and protection from the children's caregivers.

DETECTING VIOLATIONS OF POWER

What happens when a human child, charged by life with the duty to become attached to his or her caregivers and to elicit attachment from his or her caregivers, is betrayed by those very caregivers? Why are amnesia and unawareness adaptive in these cases? There is one more piece of the puzzle to inspect here, and that piece relates to the exquisite sensitivity that humans have for detecting cheating and betrayal.

Leda Cosmides (1989) has postulated that humans have a naturally evolved mental mechanism devoted to detecting cheaters. In hominid evolution the ability to reason rapidly and accurately about social contracts would have been important for survival and reproductive fitness. In a series of experiments Cosmides (1989) tested the hypothesis that humans are specifically able to detect cheaters, and are not equally able to reason about similar problems that do not involve cheating. (While evolutionary arguments in psychology have sometimes been used to justify a sexist and racist status quo, this particular argument is not necessarily at odds with feminist psychology. First, it does not, at least as stated above, predict a sex difference in the ability to reason about cheaters, and second, it focuses on the essential importance of social arrangements, trust and the consequences of violating a social agreement.) That we would be so good at detecting cheaters makes sense: under many conditions, it is to our survival advantage to be highly attuned to betrayals. To the extent that we are able to choose with

whom to engage in further social agreements, we would want to avoid those who had previously betrayed us. Presumably this is why the realization of 'I've been cheated' or even 'perhaps I've been cheated' is accompanied by such uncomfortable and intense emotions. These negative feelings presumably motivate future avoidance of cheaters.

ADAPTIVE BLINDNESS

We are exquisitely sensitive to cheating when we have the choice — and we know we have the choice — to avoid the cheater. This sensitivity to betrayal brings pain. And the pain of betrayal can be extraordinarily great. When the betrayer is someone we are dependent upon, the very mechanisms that normally protect us — sensitivity to cheating and the pain that motivates us to change things so that we will no longer be in danger — become a problem. We must block the pain, block the awareness of the betrayal, forget it, in order to ensure that we behave in ways that maintain the relationship upon which we are dependent.

Child abuse is especially likely to produce a social conflict or betrayal for the victim. If a child processes the betrayal in the normal way, he or she will be motivated to stop interacting with the betrayer. However, if the betrayer is a primary caregiver, it is essential that the child not stop inspiring attachment. For the child to withdraw from a caregiver he or she is dependent on would further threaten the child's life, both physically and mentally. Instead, the child essentially needs to ignore the betrayal.

Thus for the child who depends upon a caregiver, the trauma of abuse by that caregiver, by the very nature of it, demands that information about the abuse be blocked from mental mechanisms that control attachment and attachment behavior. The information that gets blocked may be partial (for instance, blocking emotional responses only), but in many cases the information that gets blocked will lead to a more profound disruption in awareness and autobiographical memory. In addition, this continued blockage of information about betrayal may make it difficult for us to later accurately assess the trustworthiness of people in particular, and to accurately assess aspects of interpersonal and intrapersonal reality in general.

TESTABLE PREDICTIONS OF BETRAYAL TRAUMA THEORY

A testable prediction of betrayal trauma theory is that the relationship of the abuser to the person abused will be related to the probability of amnesia for the abuse. Betrayal-trauma would predict that we would find the greatest probability of amnesia for betrayal by a close caregiver (e.g. sexual abuse by a parent who is otherwise providing nurturing). Linda Meyer Williams, in her prospective study

on memory for abuse, reports results that are highly congruent with this prediction of betrayal trauma theory. She found that women who were molested by someone they knew were more likely to have no recall of the abuse (Williams, 1994a). And she found that those with a prior period of forgetting — that is, the women with 'recovered memories' — were more likely to have been victimized by someone close to them (Williams, 1994b, 1995). These data collected by Williams, and other data collected by other researchers, are explored in more detail in Freyd (1996): in general, it is found that there is good preliminary support for the prediction that the closeness of victim and perpetrator is related to the probability of some degree of amnesia for childhood sexual abuse (see Freyd, 1996). Eventually it will be important to evaluate experiences of betrayal with detailed analyses of the degree of dependency in the relationship. Additional factors are predicted to relate to the social utility and the cognitive feasibility of forgetting childhood abuse (see Freyd, 1996).

ISSUES FOR FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Judith Herman wrote in the acknowledgments of her 1992 book *Trauma and Recovery*, 'This book owes its existence to the women's liberation movement. Its intellectual mainspring is a collective feminist project of reinventing the basic concepts of normal development and abnormal psychology.' I believe Herman's words must ring true for many of us who currently conduct research and scholarship on the topics of domestic and childhood abuse, and the psychological reactions to that abuse. As we find that previously pathologized aspects of response to abuse and trauma in fact make sense as adaptations to the exploitative environment, then assumptions of sanity and insanity are often flip-flopped (Armstrong, 1994; Brown, 1994). Is it a sign of mental illness, deviance or disorder to forget childhood sexual abuse perpetrated on a dependent child, or is such blindness in fact one route to survival and thus a sign of vitality? Betrayal trauma theory, with its focus on forgetting as a way to maintain necessary systems of attachment, certainly suggests that oppressed people may be responding adaptively when they forget aspects of their own reality — it legitimizes the reaction of those who have been abused.

As argued at the outset of this paper, trust and the violation of trust are aspects of interpersonal power and the abuse of interpersonal power. A focus on betrayal is thus implicitly a focus on power. In the case of childhood sexual abuse, that interpersonal power is a function of both the natural dependency of children on inherently more powerful caregivers, and on the ways in which that power asymmetry is increased and institutionalized by patriarchy. A complete analysis of childhood sexual abuse thus must address the nature of children's rights, and our society's consciousness of children's rights. Part of our current social upheaval stems from increasing social awareness of children's human rights. This current human rights struggle is consistent with feminist principles,

and it is in large measure being promoted by adult feminist women. Children, the oppressed group, cannot be the leaders of this movement, but they can be given voice. One way to give children voice is for adults to remember and speak the reality of childhood. Perhaps not surprisingly, however, the institutionalization of the powerlessness of children may even be preserved into adulthood, especially for daughters, such that accused parents of adults alleging childhood abuse, may have social and legal support in defining those now-adult accusers as children. The courts, media and medical/insurance establishment may thus undermine the basic rights of adults alleging childhood abuse by implicitly or even explicitly denying them the standard agency and personhood normally granted to adults (also see Bowman and Metz, 1996; Brown, 1996).

Betrayal trauma theory can also be extended to situations other than childhood sexual abuse. In cases of oppression by powerful others, when the victim feels dependent upon the oppressor and betrayal occurs, the theory predicts some degree of information loss about betrayal. For instance, in cases of battering and/or marital rape, when a woman feels dependent upon her male partner, some degree of unawareness of the abuse may be adaptive in maintaining an apparently, or actually, necessary system of dependence and attachment.

If we come to see that victims are not crazy for their response to the abuse, we nonetheless remain aware that something is indeed disordered in this situation. Thus, for a feminist psychology, it is essential that future research focus not only on psychological response to betrayal, but also on the psychology of the betrayer and the larger system supporting offenders. This is also important to a practical feminist psychology that dares to voice the unspeakable. Perpetrators of abuse, when held accountable for the abuse, may wield their power in especially destructive ways, and we must understand and learn how to counter those destructive dynamics. Without understanding, strategic response and social support for awareness and voice, blindness may remain the most adaptive response.

I have recently begun to think about a way to conceptualize the events that occur when a victim or a concerned observer openly confronts an abuser about his or her behavior after a long period of silence in which the abuser could abuse without facing consequences. My proposal, currently very speculative, is that a frequent reaction of an abuser to being held accountable is the 'DARVO' response. 'DARVO' stands for 'Deny, Attack and Reverse Victim and Offender'. It is important to distinguish types of denial, for an innocent person will probably deny a false accusation. Thus denial is not evidence of guilt. However, I propose that a certain kind of indignant self-righteous, and overtly stated, denial may in fact relate to guilt. I hypothesize that if an accusation is true, and the accused person is abusive, the denial is more indignant, self-righteous and manipulative, as compared with denial in other cases. Similarly, I have observed that actual abusers threaten, bully and make a nightmare for anyone who holds them accountable or asks them to change their abusive behavior. This attack, intended to chill and terrify, typically includes threats of law suits, overt and covert attacks

on the whistle-blower's credibility, and so on. The attack will often take the form of focusing on ridiculing the person who attempts to hold the offender accountable. The attack will also likely focus on ad hominem or ad feminam instead of intellectual/evidential issues. Finally, I propose that the offender rapidly creates the impression that the abuser is the wronged one, while the victim or concerned observer is the offender. Figure and ground are completely reversed. The more the offender is held accountable, the more wronged the offender claims to be. The offender accuses those who hold him accountable of perpetrating acts of defamation, false accusations, smearing, etc. The offender is on the offense and the person attempting to hold the offender accountable is put on the defense. 'Deny, Attack and Reverse Victim and Offender' work best together. How can someone be on the attack so viciously and be in the victim role? Future research may investigate the hypothesis that the offender rapidly goes back and forth between 'attack' and 'reverse victim and offender'.

This nascent 'DARVO' model focuses on the dynamics of perpetrators instead of focusing on the dynamics of victims. In a sense this new conceptualization addresses the flip side of adaptive blindness: it looks at the consequences of betrayal awareness and communication about that awareness to the offender. In a related vein, I have observed that one particularly useful strategy for avoiding accountability that appears in the cases of accusations of sexual abuse and assault uses logic like this: 'I am innocent until proven guilty. You cannot prove I am guilty. Therefore I am technically innocent. Therefore I am actually innocent.' This is a reasoning error, akin to statistical errors that emerge when arguing from null results. We are in fact often faced with a reality we cannot prove in public terms (and this of course changes with time, so that realities that are not provable at one time may later become provable with advances in knowledge, technology and/or epistemological assumptions). The offender takes advantage of the confusion we have in our culture over the relationship between public provability and reality (and a legal system that has a certain history in this regard) in redefining reality. Future research may test the hypothesis that the offender may well come to believe in his innocence via this logic: if no one can be sure he is guilty then logically he is not guilty no matter what really occurred. The reality is thus defined by public proof, not by personal lived experience. As a consequence of this strategy, along with the biases in our legal system and culture, claims of being victim to false accusations may be more speakable than claims of being victim to sexual and domestic offenses.

I conclude this section with a word on the importance of a focus on research ethics. This focus is important for both good science and for the goals of feminist psychology. Psychological research results have been heavily used, and often misused, in the contested memory debate. When conducting research that may be applied to the contested memory debate, at a minimum these ethics must include using restraint in arguing that results generalize from one setting to the other (see also Freyd, 1995; Freyd and Gleaves, 1996; Brown, 1996; Pope, 1995).

SUMMARY

Betrayal trauma theory highlights the importance of trust, interpersonal power and betrayal by the more powerful caregiver as crucial to motivating adaptive amnesia for abuse. Future research must not only address adaptive betrayal blindness and other victim responses to abuse, but it must also address the dynamics of responses to accountability by violators of power. In concert with both the goals of science and the interests of feminist psychology, this future research must keep research ethics — including the essential ethical issues involved in applying research to social issues — at the forefront of the endeavor.

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