

## Institutional Betrayal Research Summary

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The term "Institutional Betrayal" refers to violations perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g. sexual assault) committed within the context of the institution. Our research seeks to understand the role of institutions in traumatic experiences through the lens of betrayal trauma theory (Freyd, 1994; 1996; Freyd & Birrell, 2013), which posits that trauma perpetrated within a trusted relationship is particularly harmful. We have several research projects in progress. Four of our studies are completed and summarized below. So far our research reveals an often invisible barrier to post-traumatic care which surrounds survivors: the institutions they depend on for safety or treatment may in fact be sources of further trauma (Smith & Freyd, under review; also see <http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/institutionalbetrayal/>).

- 1) *Institutional Betrayal Causes Harm*: We have documented that institutional betrayal (e.g., an institutional environment where sexual assault seems common, where reporting is difficult, or responses to reports are inadequate) exacerbates the post-traumatic functioning (i.e., high anxiety, dissociation, and sexual dysfunction) of women who experience a campus sexual assault (Smith & Freyd, 2013a).
- 2) *Institutional Betrayal of LGBT Students*. Institutional betrayal is a particularly salient stressor for students who identify as LGBT. Cunningham, Smith, and Freyd (under review) found that compared to heterosexual peers LGBT college students report higher rates of sexual violence, experience more institutional betrayal, and suffered from more post-traumatic distress, depression, and lower self-esteem following sexual violence.
- 3) *Students Trust Their Colleges to Right Institutional Betrayal*: We have found that institutional betrayal leads to higher rates of intent to disclose to institutional sources (e.g., university police, campus resources) following exposure to experimentally manipulated vignettes describing a sexual assault involving varying levels of institutional betrayal (Smith & Lewis, in prep).
- 4) *Typical Email Alerts are a Source of Institutional Betrayal*. Many universities rely on 'Crime Alert' emails to quickly and effectively communicate when a crime has occurred, as mandated by the Clery Act. We observed that in many universities these email communications of sexual crimes were problematic in at least two ways: (1) they typically only described stranger-perpetrated sexual crimes when in fact most sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone known to the victim and (2) they offered misleading and victim-blaming safety tips. We further observed that these features of the emails were aligned with certain rape myths (e.g., sexual assault is a violent crime perpetrated by strangers, victims are responsible for being assaulted; Deming, Covan, Swan, & Billing, 2013), which is of particular concern as endorsement of rape myths predicts perpetration of sexual violence (Bohner, Siebler, & Schmelcher, 2006). We conducted an experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to read either a typical email or an alternative email we wrote specifically for our study. After reading the email, participants completed a rape myth endorsement scale. We found that the typical email maintained the 'status quo' of higher rape myth endorsement among males while the alternative email led to lower rape myth endorsements in males so that male rates were similar to female rates (Smith, Bhuptani, & Freyd, under review). These findings provide a potential model on challenging rape myths (Smith & Freyd, 2013b). These results suggest that issuing crime alert emails following stranger-perpetrated sexual violence to the exclusion of acquaintance-perpetrated violence and providing victim-blaming and misleading emails is a form of institutional betrayal among students who have experienced interpersonal violence in an existing relationship.

## References

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Web resource on Institutional Betrayal: <http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/institutionalbetrayal/>