



Betrayal Trauma Predicts Borderline Personality Characteristics: Etiological Underpinnings?

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ABSTRACT

Borderline Personality Disorder has been associated with both trauma and insecure attachment styles. Betrayal Trauma Theory proposes survivors of interpersonal trauma may remain unaware of betrayal in order to maintain a necessary attachment. This preliminary study reports on the relationship between self-reports of betrayal trauma experiences and borderline personality characteristics in a college sample. Using multiple regression, betrayal was significantly associated with BPD characteristics. Trauma with high-betrayal was the largest contributor to borderline traits and trauma with medium betrayal was also a significant predictor. However, trauma low in betrayal was not associated with BPD features. These results stand even after controlling for gender. These findings suggest betrayal may be a key, and yet heretofore unaddressed, cause of borderline personality disorder.

INTRODUCTION

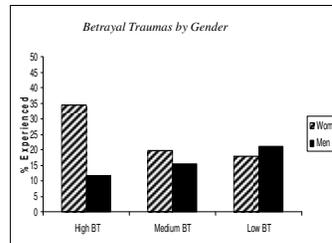
- APA defines Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) as “a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts (DSM-IV).”
- How best to understand the etiology of BPD
 - Associations between BPD and insecure attachment styles (Levy, 2005)
 - One threat to the development of a secure attachment with the caregiver is parental maltreatment (Baer & Martinez, 2006).
 - Childhood sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect are frequently observed and are all associated with the development of BPD (Battle et al. 2004).
 - Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT) as a framework for understanding BPD
 - A betrayal trauma is a type of trauma involving a violation of a trust necessary for survival, e.g., between caregiver and child (Freyd, 1996).
 - No research has been conducted on BPD within a betrayal trauma framework. This is surprising given the theoretical connections between trauma and attachment to BPD. The current study was designed to examine the association between betrayal traumas and BPD.

METHODS

- 199 undergraduate students (73% women and 26% men) (mean age = 20.1, SD = 3.40).
- Predominantly Caucasian (76.5%).
- Completed the Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS; Goldberg & Freyd, 2006) and a revised version of the Borderline Personality Inventory Leichsenring, (1999) online.
- BBTS is a 12-item, self-report measure of major traumatic events
 - Each item is classified as having one of three levels of betrayal: low, medium, and high.
 - Non-interpersonal traumas (e.g., natural disasters) are low-betrayal
 - Interpersonal traumas (e.g., being attacked) are medium or high-betrayal
- The BPI is a 53-item self-report measure evaluating characteristics typical of those diagnosed with BPD (shortened to 47 items on a 5-point Likert scale)

RESULTS

- 48% of sample experienced at least one type of first-hand trauma
- 28.1% experienced at least one high-betrayal trauma.
- High-betrayal was significantly correlated with medium-betrayal ($r = .257, p < .01$)
- Medium-betrayal was significantly correlated with low-betrayal ($r = .147, p < .05$)
- Gender was significantly correlated with high-betrayal ($r = .220, p < .01$)
 - Women ($M = .669, SD = 1.03$) had higher scores for high-betrayal experiences than men ($M = .196, SD = .566$).



- Mean BPI score was 85.3 (SD = 26.5).
- Good reliability, Cronbach's $\alpha = .944$.

	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	BPI Total	High BT	Moderate BT	Low BT
Age	--						
Gender	-.098	--					
Ethnicity	.157*	-.152*	--				
BPI Total	-.056	.096	-.062	--			
High BT	.094	.220**	-.015	.342**	--		
Moderate BT	.137	.068	-.099	.312**	.257**	--	
Low BT	.072	.048	-.025	.074	.126	.147*	--

- A multiple regression analysis was conducted.
- The model, which included gender and the three levels of betrayal trauma, did significantly predict a portion of the variance in borderline traits, $F(4, 187) = 9.68, p < .001$, adjusted $r^2 = .154$.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis for Betrayal Trauma Predicting BPI (N = 192)

Variable	B	SE B	β
Gender	1.47	4.08	0.25
High BT	7.92	1.95	.287**
Medium BT	9.26	2.82	.228**
Low BT	-0.29	2.90	-0.01

Note. $R^2 = .172$, adjusted $R^2 = .154$, $f^2 = .182$; * $p \leq .001$.

CONCLUSIONS

- High-betrayal traumas were the largest contributor to explained variance of borderline characteristics
- Medium-betrayal traumas also significantly predicted borderline features
- Traumas with low-betrayal did not relate to borderline traits.
- These results are found even after controlling for gender
 - previous work (Goldberg & Freyd, 2006) has demonstrated more women report high-betrayal traumas.
- Limitations
 - Correlational
 - College Sample
- Future Directions
 - Clinical Population
 - Examining age of trauma

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