

Betrayal trauma and dyadic trust. The mediating role of emotional intelligence

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Abstract: According to the Betrayal Trauma Theory, some traumatic experiences have an important interpersonal aspect. Previous studies have linked betrayal trauma to various adverse effects on romantic relationships. Among these, betrayal trauma can lead to a decrease in trust, especially when intimate relationships are concerned. However, the specific mechanisms linking trauma and trust received less attention. This study explores a possible mediator variable, namely emotional intelligence. 314 participants ($M_{age} = 30.28$, $SD_{age} = 11.01$, 58.3 % women) completed an online survey containing the Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey, Trust in Close Relationships scale and The Assessing Emotions Scale. The results show that emotional intelligence mediates the association between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust. The results, as well as their theoretical and practical implications, are discussed.

Keywords: Betrayal trauma, Dyadic trust, Emotional intelligence, Mediation

Introduction

Traumatic experiences are relatively common among the general population, with some studies showing that 76% of individuals experience trauma in their lifetime (Van Ameringen et al., 2008). However, while some of these are rather impersonal (such as natural disasters), others occur in interpersonal contexts.

Betrayal trauma can appear when an individual (or institution) we depend on for our well-being or survival harms or violates these expectations (Freyd, 1996). Moreover, the victim of this violation is, most likely, unable to cut ties

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with the perpetrator, future violations can also occur (Freyd, 1996). According to the betrayal trauma theory (BTT; Freyd, 1996), potentially traumatic actions can be caused by close people (parents, friends, spouses, or romantic partners). The higher the level of betrayal felt, the more severe the consequences of the trauma can be and have a more prolonged negative impact throughout life. Among them, interpersonal betrayal trauma influences the formation and quality of romantic relationships. They are negatively associated with respect for the partner, intimacy and communication, but positively with fear of relationships, depression and anxiety (Banford Witting & Busby, 2019; Dorahy et al., 2013; Owen et al., 2012; Vaillancourt-Morel et al. al., 2019). There is also strong evidence linking betrayal trauma to various processes that influence the quality of a romantic relationship, such as attachment and emotion regulation (Choi & Kangas, 2020; Kline & Palm Reed, 2020; Ruhlmann et al., 2018).

Another crucial outcome of betrayal trauma is the loss of trust. BTT states that in cases of traumatic betrayal, victims are likely to block the awareness of the betrayal, which subsequently can impair their ability to make good decisions about whom to trust (either trusting everybody in an exaggerated manner or not trusting people at all) (Freyd, 1996). Previous research shows that high levels of betrayal trauma were associated with reduced levels of interpersonal trust, both in general, as well as in specific relationships (Gobin & Freyd, 2014). A similar relationship was found when trust in institutions was concerned (Klest et al., 2019). As such, there is significant evidence linking betrayal trauma with lower trust, especially when self-reported measures of trust are used. This is especially relevant since trust is an important aspect of well-functioning, satisfying romantic relationships (Bardem et al., 2021; Finn, 2012; Norton & Baptist, 2014; Rempel et al., 1985; 2001). However, the relationship between the level of betrayal trauma and dyadic trust (the trust one has in a current or potential romantic partner) has been less explored. Moreover, the role of other potentially linking variables has also received less attention. With this study, our first aim is to test the relationship between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust in a community sample.

Increased emotional difficulties were found to be an important outcome for those who had traumatic experiences throughout their lifetime (Buduris, 2019; Janke et al., 2018). More specifically, betrayal trauma was previously associated with higher alexithymia and impaired emotion regulation (Choi & Kangas, 2020; Goldsmith et al., 2012; 2013; Keng et al., 2019). This happens because the victims of betrayal must suppress their emotions of sadness or anger, especially when they are close to the perpetrator. This maladaptive coping strategy further incapacitates them from exploring, expressing and recognizing their emotions or the emotions of those around them (Goldsmith et al., 2013). However, to our knowledge, no study tested the link between betrayal

trauma and emotional intelligence. Still, there is substantial evidence, especially from the field of neuropsychology, supporting the link between experiencing psychological trauma and a decrease in emotional intelligence (please see Gottfredson & Becker, 2023). Moreover, exposure to traumatic events predicted low trait emotional intelligence (El-Khodary & Samara, 2019). Another association that received less attention in the field of relationship sciences is the one between emotional intelligence and trust. There is evidence linking emotional intelligence and trust in the domain of organizational psychology, with various studies showing that perceiving and understanding one's own emotions and the emotions of others is related to an increased trust in mentor-protégé relationships, as well as within teams working together (Chun et al., 2010; Rezvani et al., 2019). Our second aim is to explore the mediating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust.

The present study

Although there is a strong theoretical basis for the link between betrayal trauma and trust (Freyd, 1996), there are few studies testing this association in the domain of romantic relationships. Moreover, the role of emotional intelligence, which is often impaired by traumatic experiences, as a mediator has never been explored. To address these limitations, we propose the following hypotheses: (1) There is a negative association between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust; (2) Emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 314 participants, aged between 18 and 63 years ($M = 30.28$, $SD = 11.01$), of which 183 were female (58.3 %), 128 were male (40.7 %) and 3 of another gender (1.0 %). 24.8 % were single, 37.3 % in a romantic relationship, 35.7 % married and the remaining 2.2 % divorced. For those in a relationship, the duration of the relationship varied between 1 month and 600 months ($M = 74.02$, $SD = 108.43$). 101 people were students, 180 employees, some were both students and employees ($N = 25$), and the remaining 8 people were unemployed. The majority of people live in rural areas ($N = 164$), and the remaining 150 in urban areas.

Measures

The Trust in close relationships scale (Rempel et al., 1985) is used to assess levels of trust in the partner. It is a 17-item scale with a 7-point Likert

response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) (ex. “Even if I have no reason to expect my partner to share things with me, I still feel certain that he/she will”). The scale can be divided into 3 subscales: predictability, dependability and faith. The subscales can also be used separately or combined. In this paper, we took them as a whole and made a total score, which shows the level of trust people have in their close relationships. A high score means high trust, and a low score means weak trust. In this study, the initial Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient was low ($\alpha=.60$). After removing item 7, the coefficient became more consistent ($\alpha = .65$).

Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey – BBTS (Goldberg & Freyd, 2006). The scale was used to measure exposure to interpersonal and intrapersonal trauma (such as those caused by natural disasters or by close and less close people). The questionnaire is composed of 24 items, which evaluate the exposure to any traumatic events in two time periods: before and after 18 years. The items are measured on a scale from 1 to 3, where 1 represents “never,” 2 “once or twice”, and 3 “more than that”. Examples of items that refer to intimate partner trauma are: “You were made to have some form of sexual contact, such as being touched or penetrated, by someone you were very close to, such as a parent or a lover.” and “You were emotionally or psychologically abused for a significant period of time by someone you were very close to, such as a parent or lover.” The scale allows the computation of three scores: low betrayal, medium betrayal and high betrayal. For this study, only the score for high betrayal was used (this score is computed by summing six items). When only the items for high betrayal are concerned, the scale showed an internal consistency of .69.

The Assessing Emotions Scale (Schutte et al., 2009) was used to assess emotional intelligence. This scale measures how participants identify, understand, manage, and use their emotions. The scale consists of 33 items, measured on a 5-point Likert response scale, from 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (strong agreement) (ex. “I am aware of my emotions when I experience them.”, “Looking at their facial expressions, I recognize the emotions that people experience.”). Higher scores indicate a higher emotional intelligence. The internal consistency of this scale was very good ($\alpha = 0.92$).

While the internal consistency for the first two scales was lower than the threshold of .7, it can still be considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2010). Moreover, no more items could have been eliminated based on the computed analyses.

Procedure

For the data collection, an online form containing all the questionnaires and the demographic information was created. It also included the informed consent and the participants' agreement to participate. This form has been shared

on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, in different groups. The duration of completing the questionnaire was 10 minutes and the participation was voluntary. No reward was offered for completing the questionnaire.

Data analysis

SPSS 20 was used to compute the descriptive statistics, the correlational analyses and the independent sample T tests. Mediation analysis was performed to test whether emotional intelligence mediates the link between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust. Model 4 from Process, an SPSS macro, was used for this analysis. Bootstrapping with 5000 re-samples was used to obtain parameter estimates of the specific indirect effects. The 95 % confidence intervals (*CI*s) were used to determine whether these effects were statistically significant: if the 95 % *CI* did not contain zero, then the indirect effect was considered statistically significant and mediation has been shown.

Results

Preliminary analyses

For each variable, the normality of the distribution was assessed using the *Q-Q* plot inspection. The score for betrayal trauma showed a significant deviation from normality. As such, it was normalized using the method proposed by Templeton (2011). The transformed score was normally distributed. Next, the association between the variables was tested using Pearson correlations (see Table 1). Betrayal trauma correlated significantly and negatively with emotional intelligence and dyadic trust. Also, emotional intelligence was significantly and positively associated with dyadic trust. Finally, gender differences were tested using a series of independent sample *t*-tests. Significant differences were found for betrayal trauma ($t = 4.27, p = .01, M_{women} = 7.36, M_{men} = 6.57$). Women showed higher levels of betrayal trauma compared to men.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations among the study's variables

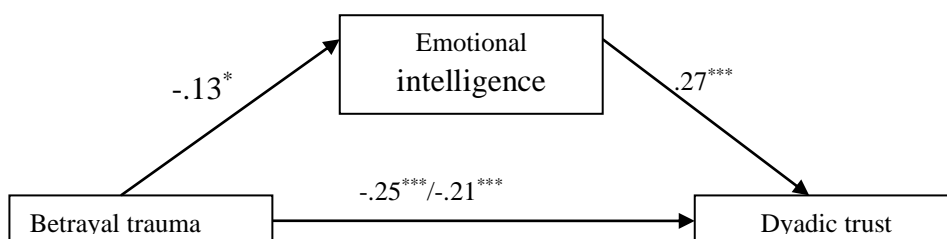
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Betrayal trauma ⁺	7.04	1.74	-	
2. Dyadic trust	4.66	.66	-.25***	-
3. Emotional intelligence	3.34	.91	-.13*	.29***

Note: * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$; ⁺ for betrayal trauma, the mean and standard deviation are computed using the non-normalized scores.

Mediation analysis

In the mediation model, betrayal trauma was introduced as the predictor, dyadic trust as the outcome and emotional intelligence was introduced as the mediator. The results showed a significant relationship between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust ($\beta = -.25, p < .001$).

The direct effect of betrayal trauma on dyadic trust was significant ($\beta = -.21, p < .001$, see Figure 1). A similar result was found for the links between betrayal trauma and emotional intelligence ($\beta = -.13, p = .01$), as well as between emotional intelligence and dyadic trust ($\beta = .27, p < .001$). Finally, the indirect effect through emotional intelligence was significant and negative ($\beta = -.03, [-.07; -.004]$). Thus, emotional intelligence mediated the relationships between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust.



Note: * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$; on the lower line, the first value is for the total effect, the second value is for the direct effect

Figure 1. Mediation analysis for the relationship between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust

Discussion

The aims of this study were to test the association between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust, as well as the potential mediating role of emotional intelligence. The results confirmed both the hypotheses we proposed.

First, we found a negative relationship between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust. The individuals who suffered from higher levels of betrayal trauma before and after 18 years old reported decreased levels of trust in their romantic partners. This confirms the previous findings of Gobin and Freyd (2014). According to BTT (Freyd, 1996), the survivors of interpersonal trauma might have lost the ability to judge trustworthiness and make accurate decisions when trust is concerned. Also, one previous study showed that the victims of childhood abuse showed lower levels of oxytocin (Heim et al., 2009), a hormone

that is related to trust in interpersonal relationships (Declerck et al., 2020; Kosfeld et al., 2005).

Another explanation for the link between betrayal trauma and dyadic trust can be proposed based on our results. We found that emotional intelligence mediated this relationship. People with higher betrayal trauma reported lower emotional intelligence, which was associated with higher dyadic trust. The impaired emotional functioning of trauma survivors is well supported by the literature (Goldsmith et al., 2013; Janke et al., 2018), as is the relationship between emotional intelligence and trust (Chun et al., 2010; Rezvani et al., 2019). However, this might be the first study to confirm these associations in the domain of romantic relationships. People with good emotional intelligence are able to control their emotions, but also to understand and respond to the emotions of others. Since this ability seems to be impaired by previous experiences of betrayal trauma, lower levels of trust might be the result of the unwillingness to be betrayed again, and the inability to control one's own negative emotions and to accurately interpret the partner's emotions.

Besides the theoretical implications, our results also can lead to better integration in therapy for the cases of betrayal trauma. Past research shows that using therapy to increase emotional expression and involvement can be helpful for the survivors of betrayal trauma. A study on the effectiveness of Emotional Focused Therapy (EFT) showed that exploring emotions, even when they are negative, like pain, can help improve dyadic trust following a betrayal by the partner (Halchuk et al., 2010). Also, increasing emotional expression, self-awareness and other awareness were beneficial for couples who were in therapy after infidelity (a form of betrayal, Bird et al., 2007). Other forms of therapy can also be used, such as written disclosure interventions (writing about past trauma), as was shown by Freyd and colleagues (2005). Thus, couple or individual therapy can be helpful because it allows the individuals who suffer from betrayal trauma to assess, express and discuss their emotions in a safe environment, but also to hear and understand the emotions of the partner in a process which, in time, can foster dyadic trust. Moreover, studies such as this one also bring some attention to the importance of not only assessing trauma as a whole but also paying attention to the individual experiences of traumatic events and specific aspects of victimization.

Despite the importance of the results, some limitations must be addressed. First, we measured all the variables using self-reported measures. Past studies showed that although they correlated, self-reported and more objective measures of trust (such as economic games) are differently related to betrayal trauma (see Gobin & Freyd, 2014). While the survivors of betrayal trauma show low levels of trust when self-reporting, they tend to show higher levels in objective measures. Thus, a future study can also take into account such measures. Also,

two of scales we used showed lower levels of internal consistency. Second, the data we used is cross-sectional. Longitudinal data are needed to discuss a true mediation relationship. Finally, both the number and the diversity of the sample can be expanded. This would allow future research to have access to different experiences of betrayal trauma and to explore how various people from various social and economic backgrounds react to and are affected by such events.

Conclusion

This study is the first to test links between betrayal trauma, emotional intelligence and dyadic trust. We found that emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between betrayal trauma and trust in the romantic partner. These results have important theoretical implications and show how and when can therapy be used to foster good couple relationships when one partner is affected by betrayal trauma.

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