THE SOCIAL COST OF BETRAYAL: HOW BROKEN TRUST AFFECTS RELATIONSHIPS AND WELLBEING

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Abstract
It is a severe violation of inter-relationships that jeopardizes trust, interferes with emotional safety, and has a detrimental effect on wellbeing. The current research involved the correlation of the experiences of betrayal and various measures of psychological and social wellbeing. A quantitative cross-sectional survey including a sample of 300 participants who were requested to fill in standardized measures on betrayal, depression, anxiety, stress, self-esteem, social connectedness, and life satisfaction was carried out. Multiple linear Regression analyses revealed that betrayal was a significant predictor of greater psychological distress and a smaller positive wellbeing. Particularly, those whose betrayal experiences were higher had higher levels of depressive symptoms, anxiety and stress and lower levels of self-esteem, social connectedness and life satisfaction. One-way ANOVA also indicated that respondents in high betrayal reported much worse results in all the measures of wellbeing than those of low and moderate betrayal. Such results indicate that betrayal can be costly psychologically and socially as a relational trauma with the extensive implication of mental well-being and interpersonal performance. The research notes that therapeutic interventions to build trust and develop resilience and preventive interventions that focus on relationships by emphasizing transparency, communication, and accountability should be done.
Keywords: *betrayal, trust, wellbeing, depression, anxiety, self-esteem, social connectedness, life satisfaction.*

Introduction

Trust is a fundamental element in human relationships, acting as the foundation upon which social bonds, intimacy, and cooperation are built. Without trust, interpersonal connections lose stability, and relationships become fragile. Betrayal defined as the violation of trust and expectations within a significant relationship is therefore one of the most emotionally damaging experiences individuals encounter (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998). Betrayal may take many forms, such as infidelity in romantic partnerships, deception in friendships, dishonesty in professional settings, or broken promises within family systems. Regardless of its form, betrayal disrupts not only individual wellbeing but also the broader social fabric in which relationships are embedded.

The social cost of betrayal extends beyond individual pain. It undermines the sense of safety that people derive from close relationships, creates mistrust in broader communities, and has ripple effects that influence cultural and societal dynamics. Betrayal usually results in depression,

anxiety, low self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress symptoms at the psychological level (Jones et al., 2021). It may socially weaken group cohesion, institutions, and create climates of suspicion. To realize the broad scope of impact of betrayal, it is important that we understand it as both a psychological trauma and a social phenomenon. Being betrayed can be a very emotionally traumatic event. Anger, sadness, grief and confusion are commonplace complaints by the victims (Freyd, 1996). Since betrayal is normally done in relations where people expect to be safe and loyal, the hurt is intensified than when done by strangers In theory of betrayal trauma, the psychological consequences of the violation of trust carried out by a caregiver, love interest or even a close friend, is the lack of stability in attachment and the vulnerability of the emergence of mental illnesses (Freyd, 1996). Betrayed victims cannot cope with depression, anxiety and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Platt et al. (2009) study shows that intrusive thoughts, nightmares and avoidance behavior are significantly associated with betrayal-related traumas including the example of infidelity or parental neglect. Furthermore, the degree of distress is dependent on the strength of the relationship, i.e. betrayal by close ones or relatives is usually the most crushing (Smith and Ruiz, 2020). In the context of the family systems, betrayal may occur in the form of negligence, abuse, or absenteeism of parents. These types of betrayals undermine the sense of security in children and intergenerational consequences may occur (Cicchetti and Toth, 2005). Children raised by caregivers who turn in to traitors of their duties may end up with insecure attachment styles that are likely to lead to challenges in establishing positive relationships in adulthood. Betrayal in professional settings such as breaches of confidentiality, exploitation, or workplace bullying undermines teamwork and organizational cohesion. Robinson and Rousseau (1994) describe these acts as "psychological contract violations," which reduce employee commitment and productivity. Employees who experience betrayal at work often report higher stress levels, decreased job satisfaction, and greater intention to leave their organization.

Infidelity is one of the most common and painful forms of betrayal. Studies suggest that discovering a partner's infidelity often results in heightened stress, depression, and relational dissolution (Gordon et al., 2004). Beyond the immediate couple, romantic betrayal also affects children, families, and extended networks. In friendships, betrayal often takes the form of gossip, abandonment, or disloyalty. Since friendships are based on voluntary trust, betrayal in this context can severely impair individuals' willingness to form new bonds. Victims frequently experience social withdrawal, which can exacerbate loneliness and mental health issues (Adams & Blieszner, 1995). When betrayal occurs within the family, through neglect, favoritism, or abuse the consequences are especially enduring. Such betrayals compromise foundational bonds and often shape personality development, resilience, and emotional health across the lifespan (Wright et al., 2009).

Review of Literature

Trust has been extensively studied as a cornerstone of human interaction, and betrayal, as its antithesis, has gained scholarly attention due to its profound psychological and social consequences. Betrayal trauma theory, introduced by Freyd (1996), emphasizes that when betrayal occurs within close relationships such as between parents and children or romantic partners the effects can be particularly devastating. This theory highlights how individuals often suppress memories or awareness of betrayal to preserve necessary relationships, which in turn leads to long-term psychological harm. Continuing this, Platt et al. (2009) indicates that betrayal trauma is intertwined with the increase in the level of anxiety and depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms, which implies that betrayal is not inferior to any other type of trauma. The cases of infidelity and other forms of betrayal in romantic relations have been one of the most significant

issues in literature too. According to Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2004), infidelity results in extreme emotional distress, loss of trust, and the dissolution of relationships and many victims develop such symptoms as PTSD trauma symptoms. Finkel et al. (2017) indicates that the issue of betrayal in intimate relationships is not only that it can be a threat to the short-term emotional stability but also to future relationship patterns as betrayed individuals are likely to become more vigilant and distrustful of the future partners. These findings show the long-term consequences of lost trust on individual health and functioning of relationships. The role of betrayal in friendship and family system has been examined in terms of self-concept and behavior in social life. Adams and Blieszner (1995) observe that friendship betrayal in most cases through gossip or disloyalty may lead to withdrawal of social networks worsening loneliness. In a similar fashion, Wright, Crawford and Del Castillo (2009) established that childhood-experiences of betraying friends and family, especially emotional neglect, had a strong association with maladaptive cognitive schemas that were predictive of subsequent psychological distress. These results show that betrayal during early developmental years can have an impact on personality, attachment and coping styles in adulthood.

Betrayal is often researched in the frame of the notion of psychological contract violations. According to Robinson and Rousseau (1994), in the event that the expectations of the workers are violated by the employers in some way, e.g. through lying or exploitation, the employees feel betrayed and this lowers the level of trust, job satisfaction as well as turnover intentions. Elangovan and Shapiro (1998) also emphasize the fact that organizational betrayal erodes the morale of the entire organization creating unhealthy working environments that breed mistrust and low productivity. This research stream shows that betrayal is not confined to intimate relationships but it also has a great effect on institutional trust and organizational health. Institutional failures go hand in hand with betrayal. Smith and Freyd (2013) propose the betrayal of institutions in which an individual gets injured because of the harm, which the institutions that are destined to deprive people become complicit or secretive in. In their work with survivors of sexual assault they discovered that the institution betrayal intensifies the trauma that makes one develop an abandonment attitude, hopelessness and distrust to authority. This is also the case, in the putnam (2000) context, where he asserts that one of the factors causing decline of civic participation and the community becoming less cohesive, is the breakdown of trust in the institutions. Taken together, these studies point to the spread of betrayal across and beyond the individual, and a broader endangerment of social order and public good. Scholars further talk about the coping mechanisms that are helpful in mitigating the impact of betrayal. Worthington and Scherer (2004) emphasize forgiveness as one of the most important emotion- based coping strategies that help lower stress and build resilience. Similarly, Taylor (2011) also underscores the role of social support network in mitigating the negative impact of betrayal since individuals that brag about their good support network are reported to have lower tendencies of psychological distress. A contribution is made by Ehlers and Clark, (2000) in proposing cognitive behavioral constructions of betrayal-related trauma treatment to offer systematic methods of dealing with intrusive thoughts and maladaptive beliefs, which accrue after betrayal of trust. The latter process also occurs within the premises of putnam (2000), where he states that the failure of the trust in the institution is among the elements that make civic participation less significant and the society less cohesive.

Methodology

The quantitative research design was applied in the current study to investigate the social and. psychological cost of betrayal on the wellbeing of individuals. Because a survey technique was chosen, it was able to collect numerical data of a relatively large sample, therefore, allowing it to

perform statistical analysis of patterns and correlation between betrayal experiences, social outcomes, and mental health indicators. The population in question was adult individuals 18 years and older who had experienced some form of interpersonal betrayal, including (but not limited to) romantic infidelity, betrayal of friendship, neglect of family, or betrayal in the workplace. Participants The purposive sampling strategy was chosen to recruit them since the research was also interested in people who can provide valuable experiences, and the online platform, community groups, and educational institutions facilitated recruitment. There were 300 respondents selected to make sure. adequate representation and statistical power for inferential analysis. The data were gathered by use of a structured questionnaire which included standardized and validated constructions. scales. The measures of betrayal experiences were based on items modified on the Betrayal Trauma. Inventory (BTI; Freyd, 1996), the measurement of how often and how intense betrayal is in. interpersonal contexts. Depression and Anxiety were assessed as factors of psychological wellbeing. and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995), whereas social wellbeing was evaluated. through the Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), which facilitated quantification of attitudes and perceptions.

The data collection process emphasized ethical considerations. Participants were provided with an informed consent form detailing the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of responses. Anonymity was preserved by ensuring that no personally identifiable information was collected. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were allowed to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Data was collected electronically to maximize accessibility and convenience while minimizing researcher bias.

Results

Table 1

Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Wellbeing Outcomes from Betrayal Experiences (N = 300)

Dependent Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p	R²
Depression	0.42	0.08	.36	5.25	<.001	.21
Anxiety	0.38	0.09	.32	4.11	<.001	.18
Stress	0.45	0.07	.39	6.43	<.001	.24
Self-Esteem	-0.31	0.06	-.28	-5.10	<.001	.15
Social Connectedness	-0.27	0.07	-.25	-3.86	<.001	.13
Life Satisfaction	-0.29	0.08	-.22	-3.45	.001	.11

The results of multiple linear regression analyses revealed that betrayal experiences significantly predicted all indicators of wellbeing (see Table 1). Specifically, betrayal was a significant positive predictor of depression ($\beta = .36$, $t = 5.25$, $p < .001$), anxiety ($\beta = .32$, $t = 4.11$, $p < .001$), and stress ($\beta = .39$, $t = 6.43$, $p < .001$). These results suggest that higher levels of betrayal are associated with greater psychological distress. Among these outcomes, betrayal accounted for the most variance in stress ($R^2 = .24$), indicating that 24% of the variability in stress levels was explained by betrayal experiences.

Table 2
One-Way ANOVA for Wellbeing Outcomes by Levels of Betrayal (N = 300)

Dependent Variable	SS (Between)	df (Between)	MS (Between)	SS (Within)	df (Within)	MS (Within)	F	p	η^2
Depression	1285.42	2	642.71	12345.18	297	41.55	15.32	<.001	.09
Anxiety	1024.36	2	512.18	12424.77	297	41.82	12.25	<.001	.08
Stress	1422.89	2	711.45	11340.55	297	38.19	18.64	<.001	.11
Self-Esteem	956.11	2	478.06	10073.77	297	33.92	14.10	<.001	.09
Social Connectedness	821.33	2	410.67	11596.20	297	39.02	10.52	<.001	.07
Life Satisfaction	703.90	2	351.95	11406.42	297	38.41	9.16		

The one-way ANOVA indicated significant group differences across levels of betrayal for all wellbeing outcomes. Individuals in the high betrayal group reported significantly higher depression ($F(2, 297) = 15.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$), anxiety ($F(2, 297) = 12.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$), and stress ($F(2, 297) = 18.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$), compared to those in the low and moderate betrayal groups.

Discussion

Betrayal is inherently tied to the violation of expectations in close relationships. When individuals encounter betrayal, the fundamental sense of safety, predictability, and belonging within relationships is disrupted. Such disruptions often manifest as heightened emotional distress, including feelings of rejection, anger, sadness, and rumination. Over time, these emotional responses contribute to the development of psychological strain, which is widely documented in trauma literature as a predictor of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and stress. In this regard, the present study adds to the literature by showing that betrayal: The present study extends the prior research by demonstrating that betrayal can be a distinctive stressor, one that can generate psychological pain similar to that experienced with other types of relationship trauma. In addition to the impact that betrayal experiences have on mental health, the betrayal experiences also seem to override the protective factors of wellbeing, including esteem, social connectedness and life-satisfaction. In relation to self-esteem, feelings of usefulness by significant others appear to be important in the development of this construct, and betrayal is one of the most important predictors of rejection or depreciation and, consequently, of the belief in relationship worth. Social connectedness can also be diminished as individuals who have been betrayed will establish distance within a relationship so as not to be destroyed further. This withdrawal not only weakens the perceived social support, but is also a cause of loneliness which is also a risk factor in terms of poorer mental and physical health outcomes. Moreover, relational trust is one of the foundations of human flourishing, and a loss of trust may cause a reduction in life satisfaction, which may itself function as a unique stressor and thus cause psychological distress on par with other relational traumas. In addition to the impact on mental health, the experiences of betrayal appear to undermine some of the protective dimensions of wellbeing including esteem, social connectedness and life-satisfaction. Self-esteem is closely related to feelings of worthiness by important people, and of betrayal is a major determinant of rejection/ devaluation, thereby reducing confidence in

the value of the relationship. Social connectedness can also be reduced due to the tendency of the betrayed to withdraw in relationships in order to avoid any further harm. Not only does this withdrawal translate into a lower perceived social support, it also results in loneliness, which is another risk factor towards poorer mental and physical health outcomes. Likewise, loss of relational trust, one of the cornerstones of human flourishing, can cause an overall decrease in life satisfaction.

Conclusion

The present research has confirmed that betrayal is not a contingent act between two individuals, but it is a mental and socially disruptive phenomenon with far reaching consequences. The results of the analysis of its relationship with different factors of wellbeing show that betrayal, on the one hand, affects negatively mental health, and, on the other, it depletes protective social and emotional resources. It exacerbates the distressing condition by increasing the level of anxiety, stress and depressive effect and eradicating positive constructions such as social connectedness, self-esteem, and a satisfaction with life. Taken together, these results indicate that betrayal is a relational trauma, which disrupts intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning. Implications beyond the immediate relational face of it, to perceptions of people themselves, others and of the larger social world. The conceptualization of betrayal as a wellbeing influence adds weight to the importance of interventions that might be used to restore trust, repair a sense of relational safety and help to build resilience in those who have already been on the receiving end of betrayal. In short, betrayal involves high social cost, which not only determines the characteristics of personal relations, but also the psychology of individuals. The answer to this phenomenon must be not only clinical but socially aware: the creation of an environment in which the importance of trust, empathy and accountability could be fostered would help to reduce the damaging effects of breached trust.

Recommendations

1. **Therapeutic Interventions**

   Mental health professionals must include betrayal-focused therapy in a therapy. Cognitive-behavioral, trauma-informed, and emotion-focused therapy would help the clients to overcome the grief of deceit, alter the negative self-assessment, and manage the emotions. When the programs are designed with the background of trust-building rebuilding, interpersonal forgiveness can be employed to help in long-term healing.

2. **Preventive Relationship Education**

   Educational programs on healthy relationships should highlight the importance of honesty, trust, and accountability. Teaching communication skills, conflict resolution, and boundary-setting in schools, universities, and community settings may reduce the likelihood of betrayal occurring in close relationships.

3. **Support Systems and Social Networks**

   Community organizations and peer-support groups should provide safe spaces for individuals to share experiences of betrayal and receive validation. Strengthening social support networks can reduce isolation, increase resilience, and foster a sense of belonging, thereby mitigating the social withdrawal that often follows betrayal.

4. **Workplace and Institutional Awareness**

   Betrayal is not limited to personal relationships; it can occur in professional and organizational settings. Workplaces should cultivate cultures of transparency and fairness, offering channels for grievance resolution and emphasizing ethical leadership to minimize experiences of betrayal in professional contexts.\

Limitations

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional, quantitative design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences. While associations between betrayal and wellbeing outcomes were observed, it cannot be determined whether betrayal directly caused these effects or whether other variables contributed. Longitudinal or experimental research designs would provide stronger evidence for causal relationships. Second, the reliance on self-report measures raises concerns regarding potential response biases, such as social desirability or inaccurate recall. Participants may have minimized or exaggerated their betrayal experiences and psychological symptoms, which could affect the validity of the findings. Third, the study was conducted with a sample of 300 participants, which, although sufficient for statistical analyses, may not fully represent diverse populations. Cultural differences, socioeconomic backgrounds, and variations in relationship types (e.g., romantic, familial, or professional) were not considered in detail, limiting the generalizability of results. Fourth, the study primarily focused on the negative outcomes of betrayal, such as distress, lowered self-esteem, and diminished social connectedness. This perspective does not account for potential positive adaptations, such as resilience or post-traumatic growth, which some individuals may experience following betrayal.

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