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Child Abuse & Neglect



Child abuse: Betrayal and disclosure[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The current study tested several hypotheses about disclosure of childhood sexual, physical, and emotional abuse derived from Betrayal Trauma Theory [Freyd, J. J. (1996). *Betrayal trauma: The logic of forgetting childhood abuse*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press]. We predicted that the duration of time from abuse to its disclosure would vary as a function of victim–perpetrator closeness.

Methods: Data collected from 202 undergraduate participants using a survey methodology were submitted to logistic regression analyses. The relative variance explained by other variables was also examined.

Results: Compared to survivors of emotional abuse (EA) who were in not very close (NVC) victim–perpetrator relationships, EA survivors in very close (VC) victim–perpetrator relationships were significantly more likely to wait 1 or more years to disclose, or never to disclose, than to wait a period of time less than 1 year (OR = 2.65). Further, survivors of physical abuse (PA) in VC victim–perpetrator relationships were significantly more likely to wait 1 or more years to disclose their abuse, if it was disclosed at all, than PA survivors of NVC victim–perpetrator relationships (OR = 3.99). Results for sexual abuse were not significant.

Conclusions: For EA and PA, VC victim–perpetrator relationships predicted longer durations of time from abuse to its disclosure than NVC victim–perpetrator relationships.

Practice implications: Although delayed disclosure may support necessary (albeit abusive) attachments with caregivers, it may also prolong the abuse and prevent receipt of support. Increased awareness that VC victim–perpetrator relationships may predict longer durations of time from abuse to its disclosure, and that these delays may serve a functional purpose, can help guide supportive and empathic responses to traumatic disclosures.

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Introduction

Although disclosure of child abuse is critical to accessing emotional, legal, or financial aid, both delayed (Alaggia, 2004; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Smith et al., 2000; Somer & Szwarzberg, 2001) and nondisclosures (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005) of sexual abuse (SA) are common. While a large body of research has examined the disclosure of SA, disclosure of emotional abuse (EA) and physical abuse (PA) has not been a primary focus. The tendency for multiple forms of abuse to co-occur (Somer & Szwarzberg, 2001) underscores the importance of examining all three forms of abuse. In addition, much of the research on delayed disclosure is not theoretically grounded. Therefore, the present study uses Freyd's Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT; Freyd, 1996) to examine the impact of the closeness of the victim–perpetrator relationship on delayed disclosure of PA, EA, and SA.

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The effects of disclosure and importance of social context

In addition to facilitating receipt of aid, other benefits of both verbal and written disclosure of negative emotional experiences have been well documented (Brown & Heimberg, 2001; Hemenover, 2003; Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000). For instance, disclosure can act as a cathartic discharge of emotion or a clarification and conveyance of relevant coping needs (Rime, 1995); insight and a sense of control may also increase with disclosure (Rime, 1995). Nondisclosure, on the other hand, may not only allow abuse to continue and prevent receipt of treatment, but may also exacerbate stress (Chin & Kroesen, 1999) and increase vulnerability for negative mental health outcomes (McNulty & Wardle, 1994).

While disclosure can be an important and adaptive coping response (Rime, 1995), as well as an important aspect of some empirically supported interventions for post-traumatic stress disorder (Resick et al., 2002; Riggs, Cahill, & Foa, 2006), there are specific instances in which disclosure is not beneficial (for reviews, see Chin & Kroesen, 1999; Cutrona, 1986; Lepore et al., 2000; Major, Cozzarelli, Sciacchitano, Cooper, & Testa, 1990; McNulty & Wardle, 1994; Pantchenko, Lawson, & Joyce, 2003; Ullman, 1996). In particular, if disclosure of a negative experience leads to *negative* feedback, nondisclosure actually predicts better outcomes (Lepore et al., 2000; Major et al., 1990).

Disclosure of sexual abuse

Prior research suggests that fewer than 1 in 4 survivors disclose immediately following abuse (Paine & Hansen, 2002). In a national random sample, nearly half of 236 female survivors of childhood rape who remembered their initial disclosures waited longer than 8 years to disclose; in contrast, only 18% of women who disclosed did so within 24 hours of abuse (Smith et al., 2000). Strikingly, 28% of participants indicated that disclosure during the research interview marked their first disclosure of the abuse. Similarly, Alaggia (2004) found that 58% of the child sexual abuse survivors interviewed delayed disclosure until adulthood. A study by Somer and Szwarberg (2001) also found long disclosure latencies, with survivors averaging nearly 15 years from the onset of the abuse to the disclosure of the trauma. Rates of nondisclosure are also quite high, as indicated by a recent review that found rates of nondisclosure ranging from 46% to 69% (London et al., 2005).

Given the high rates of delayed disclosure and nondisclosure following sexual abuse, a growing body of research has examined predictors of disclosure among survivors of sexual abuse. The examination of many abuse characteristics (e.g., gender, age at onset, severity, frequency, and relationship to perpetrator), however, has yielded inconsistent patterns of findings. For example, while some studies suggest that males take longer to disclose than females (Alaggia, 2004; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993), others indicate that gender is unrelated to delayed disclosure (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003). Most studies find that older age at the onset of abuse is predictive of delayed disclosure or decreased frequency of disclosure (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; London et al., 2005; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Smith et al., 2000); however, a handful of studies report the opposite (Alaggia, 2004; Kogan, 2004; Ruggiero et al., 2004). While some studies show that more severe abuse is associated with the decreased likelihood of disclosure (Arata, 1998; Kogan, 2004; Ruggiero et al., 2004), others posit that rates of disclosure are high on both ends of the severity continuum (i.e., for the most and least severe events) (Kogan, 2004). Still others claim that severity is not related to disclosure (London et al., 2005; Roesler, 1994; Smith et al., 2000). Evidence supporting an association between the victim–perpetrator relationship and delayed disclosure is also mixed. Although a recent review article cites several studies that both do and do not support this claim (London et al., 2005), the majority of research seems to demonstrate that a close victim–perpetrator relationship predicts a decreased likelihood of disclosure (Alaggia, 2004; Hanson, Resnick, Saunders, Kilpatrick, & Best, 1999; Kogan, 2004; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Ruggiero et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990).

Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT) as a model of disclosure

According to BTT, the relationship to the perpetrator influences the way in which a traumatic event is processed and subsequently remembered. Specifically, BTT predicts that awareness of, or memory for, traumatic events will be impaired depending on the extent to which an event constitutes a betrayal. Traumas high in betrayal, or those perpetrated by someone trusted and/or on whom the individual is dependent, are associated with less persistent memories for abuse (Freyd, 1996; Freyd, DePrince, & Zurbriggen, 2001; Schultz, Passmore, & Yoder, 2003). BTT argues that children who can decrease awareness of the abuse perpetrated by a caregiver will be better able to maintain their attachment to the caregiver. Children who are acutely aware of the abuse by the caregiver may be at risk of engaging in behaviors (such as withdrawing from or confronting the abusive caregiver) that further threaten the attachment relationship. In response to withdrawal or confrontation, the abusive caregiver may further decrease any positive caregiving behaviors and/or increase the abusive behaviors. Decreased awareness of the abuse, therefore, may serve as a protective coping mechanism that helps the child to maintain an attachment with the abusive caregiver and maximize the care that can be attained in the abusive relationship. Nondisclosure may serve a similar function to decreased awareness of the abuse. That is, disclosure of abuse by a trusted caregiver poses a threat to survival in the same way that remembering does: the child risks a decrease in positive caregiving behaviors and an increase in abusive behaviors. Therefore, keeping the abuse a secret may serve to sustain the necessary (albeit abusive) attachment.

The BTT framework offers new perspectives on the function of nondisclosure. Oftentimes, the motivation for nondisclosure is conceptualized as arising from a fear of the survivor being removed from the household or having parents incarcerated. While nondisclosure may be motivated by such fears, from the BTT framework, disclosure is conceptualized as posing a threat

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