



# Child Abuse: Betrayal and Disclosure

## Introduction

### Background

- ◆ Knowledge of the mechanisms underlying disclosure can help modify strategies for assisting trauma survivors, thereby creating a more supportive environment for disclosure.
- ◆ According to Freyd's Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT) (Freyd, 1996), it is possible that nondisclosure of abuse may pose a threat to survival in the same way that remembering abuse does: the child risks a decrease in positive caregiving behaviors and an increase in abusive behaviors.
- ◆ Keeping the abuse a secret may serve to sustain the necessary (albeit abusive) attachment relationship.
- ◆ The child may experience an implicit pressure to preserve this relationship via nondisclosure, even if the abuse occurs at a time at which the child is too young to be aware of how the world operates.

### Current Study

- ◆ Based on BTT, we predicted that relationship to perpetrator would account for the most variance in disclosure latency after controlling for the effects of other variables (e.g. age at abuse onset, duration of abuse.)
- ◆ The present study is an additional analysis of an existing data set (see preliminary report & more detail in Freyd, DePrince & Zurbriggen, 2001) that examined disclosure of physical (PA), emotional (EA), and sexual abuse (SA) given their tendency to co-occur (Somer & Szwarcberg, 2001)

## Method

### Participants

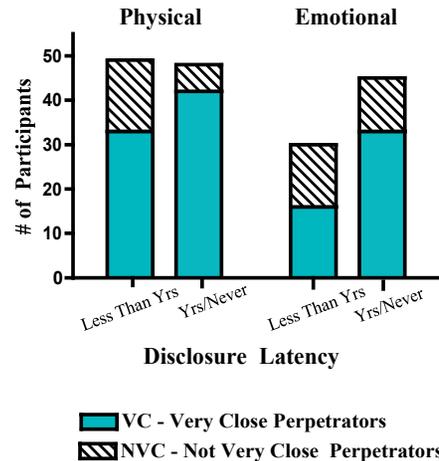
- ◆ 202 undergraduate psychology students
- ◆ 60% female (N=119); 40% male (N=81)
- ◆ Ages ranged from 18 to 31, (M=20, SD=4.06).

### Measures

Betrayal Trauma Inventory (BTI): self-report measure of emotional, physical, and sexual trauma adapted from an existing, well-validated measure (Lisak, Conklin, Hopper, Miller, Altschuler, & Smith, 2000 for more detail see Freyd, DePrince, & Zurbriggen 2001).

### Data Coding

- ◆ Following item endorsement participants provided additional information perpetrator characteristics (e.g., gender, age, and relationship to participant) and event characteristics (e.g., frequency and latency of disclosure, severity, duration, frequency and memory for the event).
- ◆ Abuse was categorized based on reported relationships to perpetrators. For physical abuse, parents, stepparents, and siblings were considered to be very close (VC) perpetrators and all other perpetrators were considered to be not very close (NVC).
- ◆ For sexual abuse, partners and ex-partners were added as VC perpetrators.
- ◆ For emotional abuse, only parents and stepparents were categorized as VC perpetrators.



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## Results

### Descriptives

- ◆ 65.3% of EA survivors, 77.3% of PA survivors, and 9.7% of SA survivors reported VC perpetrators.
- ◆ 68.5% of EA survivors, 53.6% of PA survivors, and 55.3% of SA survivors reported at least one instance of either waiting years to disclose abuse or never disclosing.

### Statistical Analyses

- ◆ Using logistic regression, the only significant predictor of disclosure latency of PA was closeness of perpetrator,  $\chi^2(1)=7.774, p<.01$ . The odds ratio, 4.23, indicated that people experiencing physical VC abuse were more likely to wait years to disclose abuse, if disclosure occurred at all.
- ◆ Using cumulative logit analysis, closeness of perpetrator was also significantly related to disclosure latency,  $\chi^2(1)=4.15, p<.05$ . The odds ratio, 2.65, indicated that people experiencing emotional VC abuse were more likely to wait longer to disclose abuse, if disclosure occurred.

## Discussion

### Summary of Findings

- ◆ Closeness of perpetrator significantly predicted disclosure latency for both PA and EA.
- ◆ For both PA and EA, VC abuse was associated with greater likelihood of disclosure years following abuse, if it occurred at all.

### Future Directions & Clinical Implications

- ◆ Elaborate on perpetrator characteristics to inform our current categorization scheme
- ◆ Examine these variables in the context of culture and ethnicity, especially since the effects of disclosure are largely contingent on social context (Lepore, 1997).
- ◆ Interventions that help recipients of disclosure handle trauma disclosure in ways that are not detrimental to survivors, as well as treatments that help survivors deal with negative social support following trauma should be developed.
- ◆ Not disclosing a negative experience predicts better outcomes than disclosing a negative experience and receiving negative feedback (e.g. Lepore, 2000; Ullman, 1996).
- ◆ Encouraging survivors to come forth to disclose trauma cannot ethically occur if disclosure frequently results in more negative outcomes than nondisclosure.

### Conclusions

- ◆ Consistent with hypotheses derived from BTT, relationship to perpetrator was a significant predictor of PA and EA disclosure latency, such that survivors abused by VC perpetrators were more likely to wait years to disclose or to never disclose.
- ◆ While nondisclosure may maintain the attachment relationship, it may also prevent the survivors from receiving any form of emotional, legal, or financial aid and contribute to a longer abuse duration.

## References

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