



What's the Harm in Asking? Participant Reaction to Trauma History Questions Compared with Other Personal Questions



Introduction

- Many researchers and IRB members express concern that asking about trauma history may itself cause harm. Perhaps because of this many studies do not include an assessment of trauma history even when it is likely to be relevant (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2002).
- Previous research has linked writing about traumatic experiences with increased positive cognitive processing, and psychological well-being (Park & Blumberg, 2002; Allard, Freyd & Momiyama, 2004).
- DePrince & Freyd (2003) assessed participants' reactions to trauma questions and found a reasonable level of tolerance and indication that participants feel trauma questions are important to ask.
- In the current study, we extended DePrince & Freyd (2003) by comparing participants' emotional reactions to trauma questions with their emotional reactions to other personal questions, and we conducted a cost-benefit analysis.
- We also asked participants to judge the importance of exploring each of these personal topics in psychological research.

Method

Participants

- 275 (192 female, 83 male) University of Oregon undergraduates.
- Demographics (representative of UO undergraduate population):
 - > Age: M = 19.54 years (SD = 2.58), range = 17 to 52 years.
 - > Ethnicity: 214 (77.8%) Caucasian; 23 (8.4%) Asian/Pacific Islander; 10 (3.6%) African American; 3 (1.1%) Native American; 2 (1%) Hispanic; and 23 (8.4%) Unknown.

Assessment Instruments

- The Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS; Goldberg & Freyd, 2004)
- Participant Response Measure (based on DePrince & Freyd, 2003). These included 3 questions about each type of research studied:
 - > Q1: Was answering this question more or less distressing than other things you sometimes encounter in day-to-day life?
 - > Q2: How important do you believe it is for psychologists to ask about ___IV___ in order to study the impact of it?
 - > Q3: Please consider both your experience answering the question about ___IV___, and your feelings about how important it is that we ask the question. How good of an idea it is to include ___IV___ measures in psychology research?
- The 4 independent variables (IV) were questions about: (1) GPA/SAT score, (2) body image, (3) psychological abuse, (4) sexual abuse.
- Responses were provided on 5 point Likert scales.

Procedure

- Participants completed a diverse packet of psychological measures in a large group "prescreening."
- At the end of the packet, participants completed the Participant Response Measure.

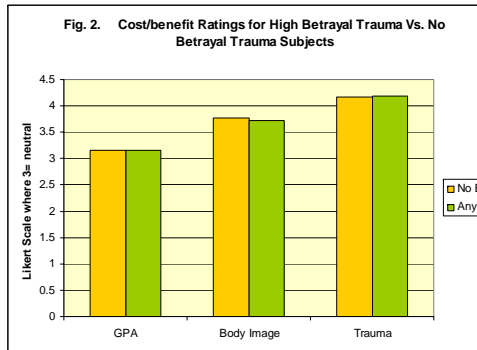
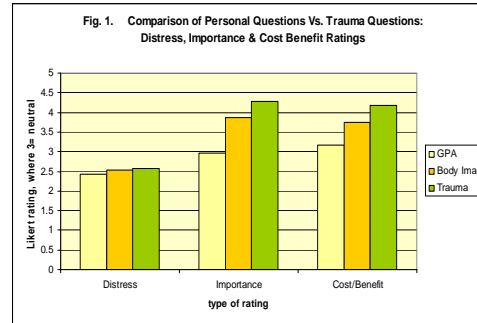


Table 1. Means and SDs for Repeated Measures ANOVA

	Distress	Importance	Cost/Benefit
GPA	2.45(1.15)	2.91(1.05)	3.15(.87)
Body Image	2.56(1.02)	3.86(.82)	3.77(.77)
Psychological Maltreatment	2.53(1.03)	4.37(.81)	4.23(.79)
Sexual Abuse	2.66(1.01)	4.24(.78)	4.12(.81)

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the McNair Scholars Program at the University of Oregon (Special thanks to Gall Unruh, and Kim Lilley) and in part by the Trauma and Oppression Research Fund at the University of Oregon Foundation.

We are grateful to members of the Dynamics lab at the University of Oregon for their contributions to this study.

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ISTSS, New Orleans, November 2004

Results

- A repeated measures ANCOVA showed no significant differences in the amount of distress reported between the conditions (see Table 1 for Means and SDs, and "Distress" in Fig. 1).
- Polynomial contrasts showed significant linear trends for importance of research type, $F(1, 250)=14.51, p<.001$, and for Cost/benefit of research type, $F(1, 250)=7.12$, (see Fig. 1).
 - > i.e. for both importance and cost/benefit:
 - > Trauma > Body Image research > GPA/SAT research
- Although participants with no Betrayal Trauma reported lower overall distress in all 4 conditions than did those with Betrayal Trauma experiences, $F(3, 264)=2.7, p<.05$, (see Fig. 2), responses for both groups were at "neutral" distress or lower.
 - > Further, there was no significant difference between the trauma and no-trauma groups for reported distress levels to sexual trauma questions
 - > Mean distress levels for both groups were "neutral" or lower.

Discussion

- Participants reported low overall levels of distress to questions about trauma, as well as to questions about grades, and body image. When assessing the "risk" of completing questionnaires about trauma, subjects report no more harm than they do for more common types of psychological research.
- Participants perceived trauma questions as more important to include in psychological research than questions about body image and grades. Further, these response means for trauma were in the "important" to "very important" range.
- This information is consistent with the 3rd finding in this study, that a cost-benefit of trauma research outweighs research about grades and BI.
- These findings extend other research that has examined participant response to trauma questions (Carlson et al., 2003; DePrince & Freyd, 2003; Griffin et al., 2003; Ruzek & Zatzick, 2000) by comparing trauma questions to other personal questions.
- This research suggests that investigators and Institutional Review Boards should not assume trauma questionnaires pose as any higher "risk" than questionnaires about body image or questions about grades.

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