

The unique harm of sexual abuse in the black community

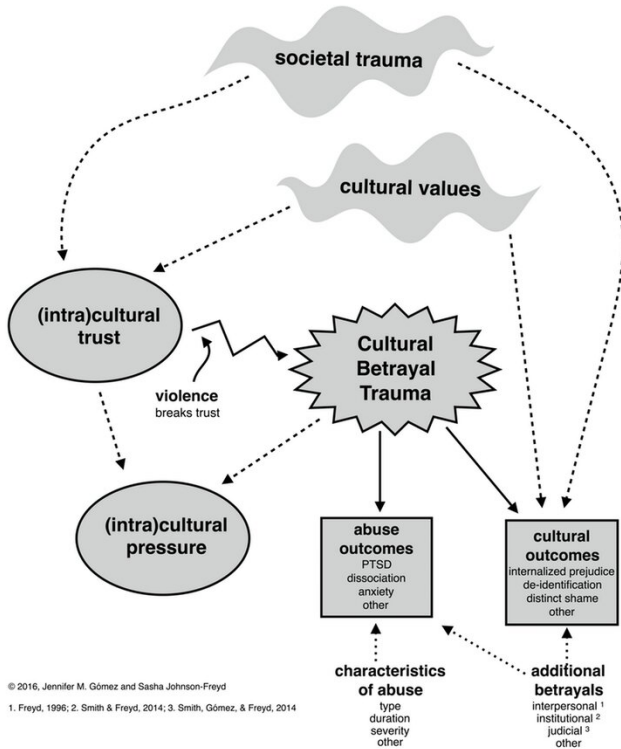
13 May 2019, by Jennifer M. Gómez

The underlying core of these questions is: What really makes [trauma](#) traumatic?

Decades of research on trauma, or physical, sexual or psychological violence, have shown the same thing: Victimization hurts people. Sexual assault in particular can be painful to all who experience it.

However, as a trauma expert who has studied the effect of violence for over a decade, I have found that there is a unique harm for black people and other minorities whose perpetrators are of the same minority group.

To understand this harm, I created [cultural betrayal trauma theory](#). The [general idea](#) of cultural betrayal trauma theory is that some minorities develop what I call "(intra)cultural trust" – love, loyalty, attachment, connection, responsibility and solidarity with each other to protect themselves from a hostile society. Within-group violence, such as a black perpetrator harming a black victim, is a violation of this (intra)cultural trust. This violation is called a cultural betrayal.



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1. Freyd, 1996; 2. Smith & Freyd, 2014; 3. Smith, Gómez, & Freyd, 2014

Cultural betrayal leads to many different outcomes.
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What makes [R. Kelly's alleged sexual abuse](#) of black girls [different](#) than that of other big-name alleged perpetrators, like Woody Allen?

What are the [different pressures](#) faced by Anita Hill and Christine Blasey Ford regarding their testimonies of alleged sexual and gender mistreatment by Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas and Brett Kavanaugh?

As the founder of the #MeToo movement, why is Tarana Burke, a [black woman](#), getting death threats from [black men](#)?

The harms of cultural betrayal

Cultural betrayal trauma, which is simply within-group violence in minority populations, is associated with many outcomes that go beyond things that are typically studied with trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. It includes some things not often thought about with trauma, such as internalized prejudice – like a black person believing the stereotype that all black people are violent.

(Intra)cultural pressure is another outcome of cultural betrayal trauma. With (intra)cultural pressure, people who experience cultural betrayal trauma are often demanded to protect the perpetrators and the minority group as a whole at all costs, even above their own well-being. With the mandate of "[don't betray your race](#)," (intra)cultural

pressure punishes people who speak out about the cultural betrayal trauma they have endured.

In a [recent study](#), I tested cultural betrayal trauma theory in youth due to the increased risk for [trauma](#) and [mental health problems](#) in the transition into adulthood.

I surveyed 179 college women online in 2015. Over 50% of these young women were victims of trauma. Just under half experienced [psychological violence](#), 14% endured physical violence, and almost one in three women were victims of sexual violence.

Of the young women who were victimized, over 80% reported at least one form of (intra)cultural pressure. This included their ethnic group suggesting that what happened to them may affect their minority group's reputation. An example of this could be a black woman who has been raped by a black man being told that she should not go to the police because it will make all black people look bad.

Additionally, I found that controlling for age, ethnicity and interracial trauma, cultural betrayal trauma and (intra)cultural pressure were associated with symptoms of PTSD. Meaning, cultural betrayal in trauma and (intra)cultural pressure were unique contributing factors of [mental health problems](#) in ethnic minority college women.

What does this all mean?

As I analyzed the findings, I was struck by several things:

- The within-group nature of trauma includes a cultural betrayal in minorities that affects mental health.
- Trauma gives us only part of the picture.
- Group-level responses and cultural norms via intra-cultural pressure impact mental health.
- Policy change that combats inequality, such as changes in education, health care, law enforcement and the judicial system, can benefit minorities who experience trauma.

These findings have implications for interventions.

Such therapy can address the very real threats of discrimination and the necessity for (intra)cultural pressure. At the same time, these interventions can use (intra)cultural trust to promote positive mental health. Additionally, evidence-informed feminist approaches, such as [relational cultural therapy](#), may benefit people who are exposed to [both trauma and societal inequality](#).

The [body of research](#) to date suggests that cultural betrayal may be a unique harm within violence in [minority](#) populations, including the black community. As such, the alleged sexual traumas perpetrated by R. Kelly and Clarence Thomas have a cultural [betrayal](#) that isn't found in Woody Allen's alleged abuse. Moreover, black men's death threats against Tarana Burke are (intra)cultural [pressure](#) that is laced with [misogynoir](#), or sexism in the black community.

[Research](#) that incorporates societal inequality can help us understand what makes trauma traumatic. In doing so, our social reactions and therapeutic interventions can ultimately be effective for blacks and other minorities who are exposed to trauma.

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