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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The unkindest cut of all: A quantitative study of betrayal narratives

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Abstract

All close relationships come with the risk of experiencing betrayal. Despite its relevance for interpersonal relationships, the literature lacks updated knowledge about the types of betrayals people are more likely to experience and their differential consequences. This paper's aim is twofold: first, to replicate and update past findings from the 1990s to 2000s regarding the typology of betrayal narratives; and second, to provide a novel test of the role of causal attributions for response to the betrayal. It presents a quantitative analysis of more than 900 betrayal narratives from British, French and Swiss respondents (students and community participants). Participants freely reported a past episode of betrayal (betrayal narrative). Results revealed that unfaithfulness from a romantic partner was the most commonly reported instance of betrayal (17%), but there were also frequent occurrences of disappointing one's hopes and expectations, lying, revealing secrets, manipulating and taking advantage, gossiping and slandering, cutting ties unexpectedly, and failing to offer assistance during time of need. Most cases involved a close friend (27%) or romantic partner (30%); while others involved family members and people in the workplace. The most common behavioural responses were to confront or cut ties with the betrayer. Forgiveness seemed possible, especially for cases that had triggered less anger. Revenge was rarely reported overall, except in cases that had triggered more anger. Finally, causal attributions (to intrinsic vs. group-based characteristics

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of the betrayer, to the situation and to the victim themselves) were related to different response to the betrayal and more specifically to forgiveness. These results contribute to developing a better typology of betrayal in interpersonal relationships. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's [Community and Social Impact Statement](#).

KEYWORDS

betrayal, betrayal narrative, breach of trust, close relationships, forgiveness, infidelity, lying, revenge

1 | INTRODUCTION

*For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel.
Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him!
This was the most unkindest cut of all,
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquished him.*

–William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 3 Scene 2

Trust is essential to our social lives, increasing life satisfaction and fuelling exchanges in functional societies (Uslaner, 2018). Yet, trust is not always reciprocated, and most of us will at some point in our life (although rarely to the extent of being literally stabbed in the back) be betrayed by someone we trusted. Such experiences of betrayal—or breach of trust—often damage the relationship existing between the trustor and the trustee (W. H. Jones, Couch, & Scott, 1997). Researchers and practitioners alike note that betrayal can cause considerable distress, sometimes even leading to depression and/or anxiety disorders (Couch, Baughman, & Derow, 2017; Rachman, 2010) as well as betrayal trauma (Freyd, Klest, & Allard, 2005).

Despite the relevance of betrayal for interpersonal relationships and well-being, not much is known about the forms of betrayal that people are more likely to experience, nor about the differential impact of these experiences. The present paper's aim is twofold: first, to bridge this gap in research by replicating and updating past findings from the 1990s to 2000s regarding the typology of betrayal narratives; and second, to provide a novel test of the role of causal attributions for response to the betrayal. To this aim, this paper provides a quantitative analysis of more than 900 betrayal narratives collected among laypeople and university students across three countries. I investigate what forms of betrayal people most often reported, the nature of their relationship and closeness to the person who betrayed, causal attributions, and the emotional and behavioural responses to the betrayal.

1.1 | Betrayal: A definition

Akin to a breach of trust, betrayal is broadly defined as “a voluntary violation of mutually known pivotal expectations of the trustor by the trusted party (trustee), which has the potential to threaten the well-being of the trustor” (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998, p. 548). Beyond sexual infidelity, such violations include active harm, disloyalty,

deceiving or misleading, disclosing confidential information, etc. Importantly, what constitutes a betrayal is ultimately subjective because it depends on people's beliefs and expectations about how others should behave in a relationship (Chan, 2009; Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998; Fitness, 2001; Holmes, 1991). Betrayal can therefore take the form of both an unwanted and unexpected action (e.g., infidelity, lies) or the lack of a wanted and expected action (e.g., failure to offer help or support).

By definition, one can only be betrayed by a person whom one trusts; as such most betrayals are committed by people we know (Couch, Jones, & Moore, 1999)—as opposed to strangers who can still harm but not betray us (but see Bohnet & Zeckhauser, 2004; Jaskowicz-Jablonek & Leiser, 2013). The present research considers betrayal from the following categories of people: a romantic partner, friends and acquaintances, family members, and people in the workplace (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998; Fitness, 2001; Hojjat, Boon, & Lozano, 2017; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994).

1.2 | Betrayal types

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, one research team extensively investigated types of betrayal. Jones, Couch and colleagues sought to identify various forms of betrayal across different types of relationships (Couch et al., 1999; W. H. Jones et al., 1997; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994; W. H. Jones, Moore, Schratte, & Negel, 2001). They collected “betrayal narratives,” asking participants to recall and describe one previous experience of betrayal. Across samples, participants often cited cases of infidelity as well as telling lies, betraying confidences, inadequate emotional support, excessive criticism, ignoring and avoiding. Less common cases of physical and psychological abuse were also identified (Couch et al., 1999; Couch et al., 2017; W. H. Jones et al., 1997; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994). Participants also cited different types of relationships (with the person who betrayed): most often spouses or partners but also friends, family members and work-related relationships.

1.3 | An urgently needed research update

It has now been 30 years since Jones, Couch and colleagues' research on betrayal narratives, and to the best of my knowledge, no effort has been made to update their findings on spontaneous betrayal narratives. Researchers have continued to utilise betrayal narratives, but most often to study specific research questions, such as the role of commitment (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002) or love styles (Couch et al., 2017) for forgiveness. Others did not study betrayal per se but more broadly interpersonal violations, offences or transgressions (Boon, Hojjat, Paulin, & Stackhouse, 2021; Kowalski, Walker, Wilkinson, Queen, & Sharpe, 2003; McCullough et al., 1998; Rapske, Boon, Alibhai, & Kheong, 2010) that trigger hurt feelings (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). Informative as it is, this research is often too restricted in scope to inform about which types of betrayal narratives people spontaneously recall. It also heavily relied on student samples (including Boon et al., 2021; Couch et al., 2017; Finkel et al., 2002; Kowalski et al., 2003; Leary et al., 1998; Rapske et al., 2010), thus limiting the generalisability of the descriptive results.

Yet, norms and expectations around social and intimate relationships have greatly evolved in the past 30 years, including gender-specific expectations (Feldman, Cauffman, Jensen, & Arnett, 2000). The advent of social media has also changed how people communicate, creating potential new opportunities for betraying others (e.g., slandering or harassing online; Watts, Wagner, Velasquez, & Behrens, 2017) but also for finding out about betrayals (e.g., monitoring a partner's activity on social networks; see Tokunaga, 2011). It is therefore possible that the picture has changed when it comes to behaviour people consider as betrayal, the types of betrayal most often recalled in betrayal narratives, the relationship to the person who betrayed, as well as previously identified differences related

to age and gender. The present research proposes to bridge this gap, adopting a methodology close to that of the original work from Jones, Couch and others.

1.4 | Research objectives

1.4.1 | The betrayal narrative procedure

I conducted four studies that aimed to collect betrayal stories from different groups, including student but also community samples. As the methodology and measures were similar across studies, I present their results in an aggregated fashion. I adopted the betrayal narrative procedure (Couch et al., 1999; Couch et al., 2017; W. H. Jones et al., 1997; W. H. Jones et al., 2001; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994) and let participants freely choose the episode of betrayal they wished to recall (with no constraint on time when the event happened nor the type of relationship). This approach allows us to gain insights into which types of betrayal are most salient in people's mind and therefore, probably, most relevant to their personal life narrative. In Couch's words, "Narrative accounts have the advantage of allowing the participant to 'tell the story' of their relevant experiences, unencumbered by the researchers' hypotheses regarding the phenomenon, and to do so in the language deriving from relevant experiences and memories" (Couch et al., 1999, p. 455). However, this also means that we cannot directly conclude about the overall prevalence of different types of betrayal in the population.

In addition to the narrative that participants reported, which was then coded into discrete categories of betrayal (see below), I asked about their relationship to the person who betrayed them, how close they were to this person and when the event happened. This descriptive part of the research is exploratory in nature and I did not make a priori hypotheses on the types of betrayal that participants would report more frequently.

1.4.2 | Emotional and behavioural response

The second aim of this research is to investigate participants' emotional (anger and hurt) and behavioural response to the betrayal (ending the relationship, forgiving, confronting, and taking revenge). Indeed, anger and hurt feelings are among the most common responses to betrayal, alongside other negative emotions (Haden & Hojjat, 2006; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994; Joskowicz-Jablonek & Leiser, 2013; Leary et al., 1998; Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009) and are useful to apprehend the seriousness of the act as evaluated by the victim. Although some betrayals lead to the relationship's dissolution, in many cases the relationship persists (see Couch et al., 1999); therefore, investigating the behavioural response to the betrayal is also informative. Trust repair research often looks at the impact of the betrayer's response after the betrayal (e.g., apologies or repentance) on the likelihood that the victim exerts revenge or forgiveness (Boon et al., 2021; Couch et al., 1999; Finkel et al., 2002; Haden & Hojjat, 2006; McCullough, 2001; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2013). Here, however, I focus on the perspective of the victim and therefore only asked about their own behavioural response.

1.4.3 | Causal attributions for the betrayal

Causal attributions have been identified as a key cognitive factor underlying responses to betrayal (Chan, 2009; Dirks, Lewicki, & Zaheer, 2009; Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009). Scholars have noted that people are typically motivated to engage in attributional analysis for negative and unexpected events such as betrayals (Chan, 2009; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Some definitions constrain betrayal to a voluntary act (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998)—although others consider that even involuntary actions can qualify as betrayals (specifically, accidental betrayals) when

“the actor was the cause of an outcome, although he or she did not intend or foresee the outcome” (i.e., attribution of intent or motive, Chan, 2009, p. 263; see also Leary et al., 1998).

Causal attributions are conceptualised somewhat differently across pieces of work. The most basic analysis relies on a distinction between attributions to internal and external factors as per Heider's (1958) model (Finkel et al., 2002; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006). Others have expanded this view to take into account controllable versus uncontrollable and stable versus unstable factors (Epitropaki, Radulovic, Ete, Thomas, & Martin, 2020; E. E. Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967; Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009; Weiner, 1985). And others use Mayer and colleagues' model of trustworthiness to distinguish attributions to lack of competence (“could not”) versus lack of integrity (“would not,” Elangovan, Auer-Rizzi, & Szabo, 2007; see also Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Generally, this work has found that attributions to factors that are internal, controllable and stable to the actor (or betrayer) lead to greater blame (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009), greater erosion of trust (Chan, 2009; Elangovan et al., 2007; Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009) and lesser forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2002). Attribution to controllable factors also leads to greater anger while attribution to stable factors leads to greater fear and resignation (Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009).

Here I propose a slightly different approach to causal attributions that distinguishes between idiosyncratic and group-based (internal) factors. In a social identity perspective, people might think of others either as individuals or as members of social groups, in which case the others' idiosyncratic or group-based characteristics become, respectively, more salient (Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Interestingly, internal stable factors can reflect both idiosyncratic characteristics (e.g., personality) and group-based characteristics (e.g., culture)—the latter being influenced by culturally shared stereotypes (Hogg, 2003; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In other words, a victim could attribute a betrayal to some idiosyncratic characteristics of the betrayer (e.g., “he's selfish, narcissistic, jealous”) or to some group characteristics (e.g., “he was raised in a different culture, has specific religious values, belongs to a high-status group”) and the distinction would not be captured in terms of internality, stability nor controllability. Yet, attributions to group-based factors might lead to lesser blame and a perception of the betrayal as more acceptable: Feldman et al. (2000) found that describing the transgressor as coming from a different culture was among the most acceptable justifications for two different forms of betrayal. These authors suggest that “by invoking culture, the issue was ostensibly changed from a moral issue, one involving harm to another person [...] to a conventional issue in which it was simply a matter of implicit or explicit understandings or custom as to how to behave” (p. 518). The distinction between idiosyncratic and group-based characteristics remains, however, under-investigated.

In addition, I argue that external attributions can be further distinguished between attributions to the context or situation and attributions to the victim herself. Previous work has mostly focused on situational attributions (e.g., explanations such as “anyone might have done the same in such circumstances” or “money corrupts”) and it has rarely considered attributions internal to the victim, or self-blame for the betrayal. While clinicians have studied self-blame appraisals in the context of betrayal trauma (Babcock & DePrince, 2012), social and organisational psychologists seem to have overlooked this possibility (with exceptions; for example, Leary et al., 1998, included “I did something that hurt the person” as a possible attribution for the betrayal from the victim's perspective). I argue that attributions (by the victim) to the victim herself versus to the context are likely to lead to different outcomes, although both would be considered “external” (to the betrayer). In summary, I consider here four different attributions for the betrayal: intrinsic characteristics of the betrayer, group characteristics of the betrayer, situation, and the victim themselves.

1.4.4 | The effects of age and gender

Gender

The final aim of this project is to shed light on the effects of age and gender on the types of betrayal people are more likely to report and their response to it. The literature yields mixed findings when it comes to gender differences in trust and trust repair strategies: men might be more trusting and women more trustworthy

(Buchan, Croson, & Solnick, 2008), but many studies could not identify any difference related to gender (see Frawley & Harrison, 2016). Similarly, when it comes to betrayal, some have found differences in the evaluations (e.g., betrayals by men were rated as more acceptable, especially by male participants; Feldman et al., 2000) and experiences of betrayal, but others have not.

It has been highlighted that men and women have different normative expectations around friendship, with women self-disclosing more to their close friends and having higher standards for friendship than men (Hojjat et al., 2017). Women could therefore be more subject to betrayal by close friends and more affected by such experiences. Indeed, studies using the betrayal narrative procedure have found that women were more likely to recall a past betrayal by a close friend than men were (Couch et al., 1999; W. H. Jones et al., 1997; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994). In the same studies, men were more likely to recall betrayals happening at the workplace.

In contrast, violations by partners—especially infidelity—have been reported to a similar extent by men and women for some decades (Couch et al., 1999; Feldman et al., 2000). In accordance with an evolutionary psychology account, emotional infidelity and sexual infidelity might respectively affect women and men more (see Haden & Hojjat, 2006; W. H. Jones et al., 2001) but overall it seems that men and women are equally likely to engage in infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

Other work could also find very little difference only between the accounts and/or responses of men and women (Fitness & Fletcher, 1993; Haden & Hojjat, 2006; Joskowicz-Jablonek & Leiser, 2013; Leary et al., 1998; Rapske et al., 2010) including for forgiveness and unforgiveness (Boon et al., 2021; Hannon, Rusbult, Finkel, & Kamashiro, 2010; Hojjat et al., 2017; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001).

Age

Some work using the betrayal narrative procedure has looked at effects of age, most often by comparing the narratives of university students to that of (non-student) adults. These studies find that university students are more likely to report past betrayals by friends and romantic partners, followed by family members (parents and siblings), while adults are more likely to report past betrayals by a spouse or partner, followed by friends and work-related relationships (Couch et al., 1999; W. H. Jones et al., 1997; W. H. Jones et al., 2001).

In summary, the above-mentioned literature suggests that participants' age and gender might influence their betrayal narratives, although one could expect to see more similarity than divergence overall, especially when it comes to the participants' response to the betrayal. I therefore tested the effects of age and gender on the betrayal narrative (category of betrayal and relationship to the betrayer) and on participants' emotional, cognitive and behavioural response.

2 | THE PRESENT RESEARCH

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants and procedure

Participants were invited to enter a study on “personal relationships and life experiences” under the form of an online questionnaire.¹ Participants in Study 1 ($N = 247$) were recruited on Prolific and compensated for their participation (conditions for participation in this study were to be an adult and currently living in the United Kingdom). Participants in Study 2 ($N = 399$) and Study 3 ($N = 93$) were university students enrolled in a psychology class in the United Kingdom and Switzerland, respectively; they participated in exchange for course credits. Participants in Study 4 ($N = 248$) were laypeople recruited through ads on various social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit) and snowball sampling who participated in the online survey on a voluntary basis; the study was offered in French and most respondents came from France (48.4%) and Switzerland (46.6%).² Study 4 was also preregistered,

including sample size, rules for exclusion, coding procedure and planned analyses (<https://aspredicted.org/aa562.pdf>). All quantitative data are publicly available on the OSF: <https://osf.io/7gyrz/>.

In all studies an attention check was embedded in the questionnaire and participants who failed it were excluded from analysis ($n = 38$ exclusions, respectively 1, 4, 4, and 29 in Studies 1, 2, 3, 4). The total sample size (N) was therefore 949. Sample sizes were determined based on feasibility constraints and the size of available student cohorts. All demographics are reported in Table 1.

2.1.2 | Materials

Betrayal narratives

The questionnaire first provided a short definition of the word “betrayal” as well as some examples, before asking participants to report one such event. Specifically, participants read:

Most people have suffered both minor and major betrayals throughout their lives, and most of us will, if only unwittingly, betray others at some point. In this study we are interested in your past experiences of being betrayed by someone. We will use the word “betrayal” to represent a number of different situations, including for example: to be disloyal or unfaithful, to lie, deceive or mislead, to reveal secrets, to seduce and desert, or to disappoint the hopes or expectations of another. In this broader sense, betrayal represents something that can happen in many situations in life, and not just sexual infidelity.

We will now ask you to focus on one specific life event when you have felt betrayed by someone. Don't look too hard, just focus on the first event that spontaneously come to mind. It could be something that happened recently or in the past. It could be an event that involved a partner, a friend or a member of your family, or someone at your workplace. Please take a few seconds to try and recall the event.

It then provided an open field where participants could write freely. Stories ranged from 1 to 310 words ($M = 21.28$, $SD = 22.57$, $Me = 15$). A minority of participants ($n = 28$) chose not to disclose their narrative but still answered all other quantitative questions. They were retained for analyses.

TABLE 1 Demographics of the sample for each study.

| | Sample 1 | | Sample 2 | | Sample 3 | | Sample 4 | | Overall | |
|-------------------|---------------|------|--------------|------|----------------|------|---------------------------|------|---------------|------|
| | UK Prolific | | UK students | | Swiss students | | French-speaking community | | | |
| | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % |
| Gender | | | | | | | | | | |
| Men | 121 | 49.2 | 79 | 20.0 | 20 | 22.5 | 98 | 44.7 | 318 | 33.5 |
| Women | 122 | 49.6 | 307 | 77.7 | 66 | 74.2 | 116 | 53.0 | 611 | 64.4 |
| Other | 1 | 0.4 | 6 | 1.5 | 2 | 2.2 | 4 | 1.8 | 13 | 1.4 |
| Prefer not to say | 2 | 0.8 | 3 | 0.8 | 1 | 1.1 | 1 | 0.5 | 7 | 0.7 |
| Age | | | | | | | | | | |
| Range | 19–80 | | 17–50 | | 18–43 | | 17–76 | | 17–80 | |
| <i>M (SD)</i> | 40.37 (13.57) | | 19.47 (2.68) | | 21.82 (5.19) | | 33.15 (10.24) | | 28.26 (12.52) | |
| <i>N</i> | 246 | 100% | 395 | 100% | 89 | 100% | 219 | 100% | 949 | 100% |

Additional information about the betrayal

Participants then answered additional questions about the betrayal they had reported. First, they indicated their relationship to the person who betrayed them: A partner/a very close friend/a friend/an acquaintance/someone in your close of inner family/someone in your extended family/someone at your workplace (a colleague, employer or employee)/other. They then specified when the event happened: More than 10 years ago/10–5 years ago/5–2 years ago/2–1 year ago/12–6 months ago/6–3 months ago/3 months ago or less. I finally measured interpersonal closeness with the person who betrayed with an adapted Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The question asked, “Before the betrayal, how close did you feel to the person?” and answers were visual depictions of pairs of circles increasingly overlapping (seven-point scale).

Emotional and behavioural response

I also assessed participants' emotional response “when they first found out about the betrayal” (self-generated items: angry, hateful, distressed, hurt, rejected; seven-point Likert scale ranging 1 = *Not at all* to 7 = *Extremely*). An exploratory factor analysis (with oblique rotation, extraction based on Eigenvalues) grouped the items in two factors, the first pertaining to dejection and hurt feelings (distressed, hurt, rejected; $\alpha = .72$) and the second pertaining to anger (angry, hateful; $r(941) = .62, p < .001$). I aggregated the items accordingly in two separate scores. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2 alongside a correlation matrix.

I also assessed four different behavioural responses (see McCullough et al., 2013), each with one single item: “After the event, did you cut ties with the person who betrayed you?,” “Did you confront the person about what they did?,” “Did you take revenge for what the person did to you?,” “Did you forgive the person for what they did to you?”; all items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging 1 = *Not at all* to 7 = *Extremely* (see Table 2).

Causal attributions

Participants in Samples 2, 3 and 4 finally indicated their causal attributions for the betrayal ($n = 687$; see Table 2). Specifically, the question read, “There might be many different reasons why the person did what they did to you. How much would you say that the event is attributable to...” (a) reasons specific to intrinsic characteristics of the person (e.g., their personality), (b) reasons specific to group characteristics of the person (e.g., their gender, culture), (c) reasons specific to the situation, (d) reasons specific to yourself (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Completely*; self-generated items).³

2.1.3 | Betrayal category and coding procedure

I aimed to categorise participants' betrayal narratives in discrete categories. I started with predefined categories from the literature: (a) being disloyal or unfaithful; (b) deceiving, lying or misleading; (c) revealing secrets; and (d) disappointing one's hopes of expectations. After screening and pre-coding narratives from Study 1, I devised additional categories to represent recurring themes: (e) manipulating or taking advantage; (f) cutting ties unexpectedly; and (g) failing to offer assistance during time of need. Later on, while processing narratives from Studies 2–3, I added two final categories: (h) slander, and (i) physical and psychological abuse. All narratives were screened a second time and recoded as necessary to account for these additional categories.

For Study 1, two research assistants independently coded all narratives. Their initial coding showed 62% agreement. The remaining narratives were reviewed and discussed until a consensus could be reached in each case. For Studies 2–4, participants were asked to provide a categorisation themselves (“If you had to put a label on the betrayal you just recalled, which of the following categories would you say it fits best in?”). One researcher blind to

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics and correlations between interpersonal closeness, emotional and behavioural responses, and causal attributions for the betrayal.

| | Descriptive statistics | | Pearson's correlations | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------------------|-----|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--|
| | M (SD) | N | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | |
| 1 Interpersonal closeness | 4.78 (1.70) | 938 | .33*** | .03 | -.03 | .23*** | .03 | .08* | .03 | -.04 | .00 | .01 | |
| 2 Emotions: Hurt | 5.53 (1.37) | 939 | — | .32*** | .08* | .15*** | .07* | -.04 | .08* | .05 | .06 | .22*** | |
| 3 Emotions: Anger | 5.04 (1.54) | 939 | — | — | .13*** | .25*** | .23*** | -.21*** | .11** | .07 | -.02 | .04 | |
| 4 Cut ties | 4.35 (2.36) | 939 | — | — | — | .03 | .01 | -.32*** | .16*** | .06 | -.06 | .11** | |
| 5 Confront | 4.67 (2.36) | 939 | — | — | — | — | .19*** | .05 | .10** | .02 | .05 | .02 | |
| 6 Revenge | 1.70 (1.46) | 939 | — | — | — | — | — | -.06 | -.03 | -.01 | .01 | .05 | |
| 7 Forgive | 3.57 (2.06) | 939 | — | — | — | — | — | — | -.11** | .08* | .14*** | -.04 | |
| 8 Attributions: Intrinsic characteristics | 5.16 (1.71) | 687 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | .15*** | -.03 | .05 | |
| 9 Attributions: Group characteristics | 3.44 (2.07) | 687 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | .02 | .05 | |
| 10 Attributions: Situation | 4.52 (1.91) | 687 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | .25*** | |
| 11 Attributions: Self-blame | 3.32 (1.91) | 687 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | |

Note: All items are measured on a seven-point Likert scale. Interpersonal closeness, emotions and behavioural responses were assessed in all samples ($N = 939$). Attributions were assessed in Samples 2–4 ($n = 687$).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

the participants' categorisation additionally coded all narratives. This coding showed 59–63% agreement across studies with that of the participants. The remaining narratives were reviewed in the team until a consensual decision could be reached. In cases where the text was ambiguous or extremely brief, we stuck with the categorisation the participants had themselves provided.

2.2 | Results

2.2.1 | Betrayal narratives: Who did what when?

I first investigated the betrayal narratives descriptively. Looking at the categorisation, the data showed that disloyalty and unfaithfulness was the most frequently reported form of betrayal (23.0%; see Table 3). These often depicted a romantic partner being unfaithful.

They cheated on me with a flat mate despite saying nothing would happen between them.
(34-year-old male)

However, there were also depictions of disloyalty by a close friend, who, for example, started dating a love interest or ex-partner of the participant or failed to support the participant in the face of adversity.

Didn't react when I was talked about behind my back, preferred not to tell me anything for fear of hurting my feelings. I found out later from another, much less close friend who turned out to be genuine. (20-year-old female)

This was closely followed by disappointment of hopes and expectations (21.1%). This category covered all sorts of situations, from non-invitation to a wedding to breaking promises, last-minute cancelling of plans, misinterpreting intentions, prioritising other people and so on.

TABLE 3 Betrayal narratives: Betrayal classification.

| | Overall | | UK Prolific | | UK students | | Swiss students | | French-speaking community | |
|---|---------|------|-------------|------|-------------|------|----------------|------|---------------------------|------|
| | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % |
| Being disloyal or unfaithful | 218 | 23.0 | 65 | 26.4 | 83 | 21.0 | 20 | 22.5 | 50 | 22.8 |
| Disappointing your hopes or expectations | 200 | 21.1 | 63 | 25.6 | 78 | 19.7 | 11 | 12.4 | 48 | 21.9 |
| Deceiving, lying or misleading | 140 | 14.8 | 31 | 12.6 | 66 | 16.7 | 14 | 15.7 | 29 | 13.2 |
| Manipulating or taking advantage | 105 | 11.1 | 33 | 13.4 | 27 | 6.8 | 7 | 7.9 | 38 | 17.4 |
| Revealing secrets | 82 | 8.6 | 18 | 7.3 | 45 | 11.4 | 9 | 10.1 | 10 | 4.6 |
| Slander | 76 | 8.0 | 14 | 5.7 | 42 | 10.6 | 5 | 5.6 | 15 | 6.8 |
| Cutting ties unexpectedly | 66 | 7.0 | 8 | 3.3 | 28 | 7.1 | 13 | 14.6 | 17 | 7.8 |
| Failing to offer assistance during time of need | 44 | 4.6 | 6 | 2.4 | 19 | 4.8 | 9 | 10.1 | 10 | 4.6 |
| Physical and psychological abuse | 14 | 1.5 | 5 | 2.0 | 6 | 1.5 | 1 | 1.1 | 2 | 0.9 |
| Other | 2 | 0.2 | 1 | 0.4 | 1 | 0.3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 947 | 100% | 244 | 100% | 395 | 100% | 89 | 100% | 219 | 100% |

We decided to go together to watch a movie so I waited for the weekend and when it came to organising a movie trip and was excited to go, the friend said he didn't want to go and eventually I found out that he had already seen the movie. (42-year-old male)

She didn't invite me to her engagement party even though we are close cousins. (21-year-old female)

Someone I used to work with left the company and poached a good member of my team to his new rival company. (37-year-old male)

Deceptions and lies were also frequent (14.8%).

My partner had a history of gambling addiction. I thought we had got past it and he was in a good place. I caught him out and when confronting him he continued to deny it and lie to me. (28-year-old female)

I lent a friend some money (quite a large sum if we are honest) as they were going through a difficult time. I was promised I would get the money back and they lied. They stopped speaking to me instead. (31-year-old female)

Other forms were less frequent although still occurring. For example, we counted 8.6% cases of revealing secrets and 8.0% of slander. Interestingly, while some participants clearly mention the slandering took place online, many cases still seemed to happen "live" through direct communications.

My supposed close friend had revealed a secret to everyone I told them, which I told them not to tell anyone. (20-year-old female)

A close friend of mine was making comments behind my back to several people about my physical appearance. (18-year-old female)

An ex-colleague spread a rumour about me and manager. (25-year-old male)

There were also instances of manipulating or taking advantage of the participant (11.1%). These included stealing possessions, stealing ideas and passing them as one's own (especially in the workplace), wrongly putting the blame on the participant, hindering a course of actions and so on.

[A close friend] turned all of my friends in my friendship group at the time against me even though I was there for them and took them in as a friend when they were new to the school. (19-year-old female)

We were both down for a promotion and both agreed to NOT apply for it. "Let the business decide" is what we agreed. However my colleague applied and as I did not she got the role. The business thought I wasn't interested. It was then too late to do anything about it. (45-year-old male)

In other cases, it was not an action but the lack of action that constituted the betrayal. Seven percent of cases described unexpected cutting ties, that is, suddenly refusing all communication and being evasive as for the underlying reasons. Some participants described it explicitly as "ghosting."

The friend was being very evasive and seemingly withdrew from much direct contact. Apparently something that we had shared for 17 years was not important to him and he had unilaterally ended it without consulting me or giving me an option. (63-year-old male)

In addition, 4.6% cases described failure to offer assistance during time of need, with “time of need” including hardship, mental health struggle, substance abuse, and sometimes bullying or sexual harassment by a third party.

I was going through an extremely tough time at home, parents splitting up etc. I needed my best friend the most but she just wouldn't talk to me for some reason. She said that my life was causing her anxiety. Just very strange. (20-year-old female)

My father promised he would help me with my alcohol problem but ignored the situation after that conversation. (23-year-old female)

The person who had betrayed was most often a partner (29.9%) or a very close friend (27.2%). Other cases included a friend (15.6%), a close family member (12.3%) and someone at the workplace (12.9%; see Table 4). For simplification purposes, in the following analyses, I excluded the only two narratives that were classified as “other” and simplified the person-who-betrayed categorisation, grouping “friend” with “acquaintance,” and members of “extended family” with that of “close family.”

Table 5 depicts the interaction between betrayal categories and person who betrayed. An equivalent table with all line and column percentages can be found in [Electronic Supplementary Material \(ESM1\)](#). Although most cases of disloyalty and unfaithfulness pertained to a partner (sexual infidelity), a number of cases also pertained to perceived disloyalty by a close friend or a family member. Cases of manipulation or taking advantage seemed to occur mostly at the workplace, although some were also attributed to friends. Friends were also most likely to be cited in cases of slander and revealing secrets as well as failing to offer assistance in time of need and cutting ties unexpectedly.

Interpersonal closeness with the person who betrayed was high (Table 2) and, on average, significantly above the scale mid-point, $t(941) = 13.98$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.46$ (UK Prolific: $M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.72$; UK students: $M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.66$; Swiss students: $M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.46$; French-speaking community sample: $M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.80$). As could be expected, interpersonal closeness depended on the relationship with the person who betrayed, $F(4, 937) = 110.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.321$. Partners ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.44$) and very close friends

TABLE 4 Betrayal narratives: Relationship to the person who betrayed.

| | Overall | | UK Prolific | | UK students | | Swiss students | | French-speaking community | |
|---|---------|------|-------------|------|-------------|------|----------------|------|---------------------------|------|
| | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % |
| A partner | 284 | 29.9 | 67 | 27.2 | 104 | 26.3 | 27 | 30.3 | 86 | 39.3 |
| A very close friend | 258 | 27.2 | 54 | 22.0 | 128 | 32.4 | 32 | 36.0 | 44 | 20.1 |
| A friend | 148 | 15.6 | 36 | 14.6 | 80 | 20.3 | 10 | 11.2 | 22 | 10.0 |
| An acquaintance | 12 | 1.3 | 1 | 0.4 | 6 | 1.5 | 3 | 3.4 | 2 | 0.9 |
| Someone in your close or inner family | 117 | 12.3 | 28 | 11.4 | 52 | 13.2 | 13 | 14.6 | 24 | 11.0 |
| Someone in your extended family | 8 | 0.8 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 1.5 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0.9 |
| Someone at your workplace (a colleague, employer or employee) | 122 | 12.9 | 60 | 24.4 | 19 | 4.8 | 4 | 4.5 | 39 | 17.8 |
| Total | 949 | 100% | 246 | 100% | 395 | 100% | 89 | 100% | 219 | 100% |

TABLE 5 Cross-table: Betrayal narratives categorisation and relationship to the person who betrayed.

| | Partner | Very close friend | Friend/acquaintance | Family | Workplace | Total |
|--|---------|-------------------|---------------------|--------|-----------|-------|
| Being disloyal or unfaithful | 160 | 31 | 13 | 12 | 2 | 218 |
| Disappointing your hopes or expectations | 36 | 70 | 32 | 36 | 26 | 200 |
| Deceiving, lying or misleading | 42 | 31 | 28 | 25 | 14 | 140 |
| Manipulating or taking advantage | 10 | 24 | 17 | 9 | 45 | 105 |
| Revealing secrets | 9 | 23 | 25 | 11 | 14 | 82 |
| Slander | 4 | 29 | 17 | 12 | 14 | 76 |
| Cutting ties unexpectedly | 18 | 28 | 17 | 3 | 0 | 66 |
| Failing to offer assistance during times of need | 1 | 20 | 8 | 10 | 5 | 44 |
| Physical and psychological abuse | 3 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 1 | 14 |
| Total | 283 | 258 | 158 | 125 | 121 | 945 |

Note: The person-who-betrayed categorisation has been simplified by grouping “friend” and “acquaintance,” as well as “close” with “extended” family. The two “other” classified betrayal narratives have been excluded here.

TABLE 6 Betrayal narratives: When did the event happened?

| | Overall | | UK Prolific | | UK students | | Swiss students | | French-speaking community | |
|------------------------|---------|------|-------------|------|-------------|------|----------------|------|---------------------------|------|
| | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % |
| More than 10 years ago | 124 | 13.1 | 70 | 28.5 | 11 | 2.8 | 7 | 7.9 | 36 | 16.4 |
| 10–5 years ago | 143 | 15.1 | 49 | 19.9 | 41 | 10.4 | 7 | 7.9 | 46 | 21.0 |
| 5–2 years ago | 193 | 20.3 | 44 | 17.9 | 83 | 21.0 | 18 | 20.2 | 48 | 21.9 |
| 2–1 year ago | 169 | 17.8 | 40 | 16.3 | 73 | 18.5 | 20 | 22.5 | 36 | 16.4 |
| 12–6 months ago | 125 | 13.2 | 20 | 8.1 | 62 | 15.7 | 24 | 27.0 | 19 | 8.7 |
| 6–3 months ago | 71 | 7.5 | 14 | 5.7 | 34 | 8.6 | 8 | 9.0 | 15 | 6.8 |
| 3 months ago or less | 124 | 13.1 | 9 | 3.7 | 91 | 23.0 | 5 | 5.6 | 19 | 8.7 |
| Total | 949 | 100% | 246 | 100% | 395 | 100% | 89 | 100% | 219 | 100% |

($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.13$; not differing from one another, $p = .25$) were rated as closer than family members ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.75$), themselves closer than friends and acquaintances ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.42$), themselves closer than people at the workplace ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.43$; all differences significant at $p < .001$ in multiple comparisons with LSD correction).

Finally, the stories reported had occurred at all sorts of time, from the distant past (10 years ago or more) to very recent past (during the last year and as close as just months ago; see Table 6).

2.2.2 | Emotional and behavioural response

I turned next to emotional and behavioural responses to the different categories of betrayal. An inspection of the correlation table (see Table 2) showed feelings of hurt and anger were positively correlated. However, hurt feelings mostly correlated with the behavioural response of confrontation. Anger feelings correlated with greater likelihood of confrontation, cutting ties and taking revenge, and lower likelihood of forgiving.

Response to different categories of betrayal

Responses varied widely depending on the betrayal category (Table 7). Cases of abuse, being disloyal or unfaithful, failing to offer assistance and cutting ties unexpectedly, provoked the most hurt feelings. Abuse and disloyalty/unfaithfulness were also associated with greater anger, while cutting ties was much less. Revealing secrets seemed to provoke a lesser emotional response than other forms of betrayal. Turning to behavioural response, it appears that participants were relatively likely to have cut ties or confronted the person who betrayed them, much more so than to have taken revenge. Cutting ties was especially likely when the betrayal took the form of abuse, manipulation/taking advantage, slander (and, somewhat tautologically, cutting ties unexpectedly). Confrontation was especially likely in cases of disloyalty and unfaithfulness, as was (although absolute levels remain very low) revenge. Forgiveness seemed possible for many cases except for abuse, and to a lesser extent for manipulation/taking advantage and slander.

Responses to different people who betrayed

I also investigated how emotional and behavioural responses might depend on the relationship with the person who betrayed (see Table 7). Betrayal by a partner elicited the highest feelings of both hurt and anger (although anger ratings did not differ much across categories). It was also the most likely to result in confrontation and even taking revenge (although, again, absolute levels remain very low). Betrayal by friends and very close friends was most likely to result in the participant cutting ties with them. Interestingly, feelings of hurt tend to be higher than anger for all categories except betrayals by someone at the workplace, for which it was the opposite. Perhaps as a result of this emotional response, betrayal by someone at the workplace was the least likely to be forgiven.

I also tested whether underlying differences in interpersonal closeness were responsible for the effect. When added as a covariate, interpersonal closeness was related to greater hurt feelings and greater likelihood of confronting the betrayer but not to other responses. Crucially, the main effect of category of person was unaffected by the introduction of the covariate (see full output in ESM2).

Additional analyses also focused on the five most frequent combinations of person/category (i.e., disloyalty by a partner, disappointment of expectations by a very close friend, etc.) and compared responses across these five clusters specifically. These results are reported in ESM3.

2.2.3 | Causal attributions for the betrayal

Descriptive analyses

Participants mostly attributed the betrayal to intrinsic characteristics of the betrayer ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.71$), followed by the situation ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.91$). Attributions to group characteristics of the betrayer ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 2.07$) and self-blame ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.91$) were less pronounced. Attributions were not function of the category of betrayal, $F_s(8, 678) < 1.76$, $p_s > .08$, except for a very small effect on self-blame, $F(8, 678) = 1.97$, $p = .047$, suggesting that self-blame is more prevalent in cases of unexpectedly cutting ties, and less prevalent in cases of disloyalty and disappointment of expectations. Self-blame was also the only attribution that depended on the relationship with the person who betrayed, $F(4, 682) = 3.97$, $p = .003$ (all other effects: $F_s(4, 682) < 1.12$, $p_s > .34$): self-blame was lowest in betrayals involving someone at the workplace, compared with all other situations.

Causal attributions and emotional and behavioural response

I then turned to the relationship between causal attributions and responses to the betrayal. I regressed each emotional and behavioural response on the set of four attributions entered as multiple predictors in a linear regression model (see full output in Table 8). The analyses revealed that attributions to intrinsic characteristics of the betrayer were related to more anger, $t(682) = 2.66$, $p = .008$, and greater likelihood of cutting ties, $t(682) = 3.91$, $p < .001$, and confronting the betrayer, $t(682) = 2.67$, $p = .008$. Attributions to the situation were related to lesser likelihood

TABLE 7 Emotional and behavioural responses to different categories of betrayal and to different people who betrayed.

| | Emotional response | | Behavioural response | | | | N |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-----|
| | Hurt | Anger | Cut ties | Confront | Revenge | Forgive | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Category of betrayal | | | | | | | |
| Being disloyal or unfaithful | 6.07 (1.06) ^a | 5.47 (1.59) ^a | 4.33 (2.30) ^{bc} | 5.70 (1.92) ^a | 2.03 (1.83) ^a | 3.64 (2.11) ^{ab} | 218 |
| Disappointing your hopes or expectations | 5.38 (1.33) ^b | 4.87 (1.50) ^c | 3.92 (2.47) ^{cd} | 4.34 (2.42) ^b | 1.55 (1.31) ^{bc} | 3.83 (2.02) ^a | 200 |
| Deceiving, lying or misleading | 5.34 (1.48) ^b | 5.06 (1.35) ^{bc} | 4.28 (2.34) ^{bc} | 4.78 (2.35) ^b | 1.75 (1.48) ^{ab} | 3.63 (2.05) ^{ab} | 140 |
| Manipulating or taking advantage | 5.11 (1.48) ^{bc} | 5.24 (1.49) ^{ab} | 4.83 (2.30) ^{ab} | 4.63 (2.28) ^b | 1.76 (1.44) ^{ab} | 2.79 (2.01) ^{bc} | 105 |
| Revealing secrets | 4.78 (1.43) ^c | 4.81 (1.42) ^c | 3.70 (2.31) ^d | 4.41 (2.32) ^b | 1.45 (1.16) ^{bc} | 4.01 (1.91) ^a | 82 |
| Slander | 5.44 (1.23) ^b | 5.19 (1.38) ^{abc} | 5.16 (2.23) ^a | 4.16 (2.34) ^{bc} | 1.55 (1.16) ^{bc} | 3.13 (1.91) ^{bc} | 76 |
| Cutting ties unexpectedly | 5.93 (1.18) ^a | 3.93 (1.63) ^d | 5.14 (2.01) ^a | 3.47 (2.46) ^c | 1.30 (1.12) ^c | 3.79 (2.09) ^a | 66 |
| Failing to offer assistance during time of need | 5.90 (1.52) ^{ab} | 4.80 (1.49) ^{bc} | 3.86 (2.35) ^{cd} | 4.20 (2.46) ^{bc} | 1.86 (1.42) ^a | 3.82 (2.03) ^{ab} | 44 |
| Physical and psychological abuse | 6.40 (0.86) ^a | 5.79 (1.41) ^a | 5.36 (2.02) ^a | 4.21 (2.83) ^{bc} | 1.14 (0.54) ^{bc} | 2.07 (1.90) ^c | 14 |
| Total | 5.53 (1.37) | 5.04 (1.54) | 4.35 (2.36) | 4.67 (2.36) | 1.70 (1.46) | 3.57 (2.06) | 945 |
| Effect: $F(8, 930)$ | 11.93 ^{***} | 8.28 ^{***} | 4.90 ^{***} | 9.29 ^{***} | 3.05 ^{**} | 4.45 ^{***} | |
| η^2_p | 0.093 | 0.066 | 0.040 | 0.074 | 0.026 | 0.037 | |
| Person who betrayed | | | | | | | |
| A partner | 6.04 (1.10) ^a | 5.17 (1.65) ^a | 4.24 (2.38) ^b | 5.64 (2.03) ^a | 1.93 (1.78) ^a | 3.74 (2.12) ^a | 280 |
| A very close friend | 5.80 (1.15) ^b | 5.09 (1.49) ^a | 4.79 (2.36) ^a | 4.59 (2.40) ^b | 1.54 (1.29) ^b | 3.54 (2.05) ^a | 257 |
| A friend/acquaintance | 5.07 (1.40) ^d | 4.66 (1.44) ^b | 4.78 (2.15) ^a | 3.98 (2.28) ^{cd} | 1.73 (1.38) ^{ab} | 3.77 (1.99) ^a | 158 |
| Someone in your family | 5.40 (1.48) ^c | 5.07 (1.58) ^a | 3.31 (2.35) ^c | 4.40 (2.43) ^{bc} | 1.64 (1.38) ^{ab} | 3.78 (2.07) ^a | 124 |
| Someone at your workplace | 4.53 (1.49) ^e | 5.11 (1.36) ^a | 4.22 (2.23) ^b | 3.80 (2.31) ^d | 1.48 (1.09) ^b | 2.74 (1.85) ^b | 120 |
| Total | 5.53 (1.37) | 5.04 (1.54) | 4.35 (2.36) | 4.67 (2.36) | 1.70 (1.46) | 3.57 (2.06) | 939 |
| Effect: $F(4, 934)$ | 38.00 ^{***} | 3.17 [*] | 10.25 ^{***} | 21.34 ^{***} | 3.29 [*] | 6.20 ^{***} | |
| η^2_p | 0.140 | 0.013 | 0.042 | 0.084 | 0.014 | 0.026 | |

Note: Different letters (a–e) show categories that differ from each other at $p < .05$ in multiple comparisons with LSD correction.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 8 Causal attributions and emotional and behavioural response.

| Predictor (attributions to...) | Emotional response | | Behavioural response | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------|----------------------|----------|---------|---------|
| | Hurt | Anger | Cut ties | Confront | Revenge | Forgive |
| Intrinsic characteristics: $t(682)$ | 1.64 | 2.66** | 3.91*** | 2.67** | -0.84 | -3.18** |
| β | .062 | .102 | .149 | .103 | -.032 | -.120 |
| Group characteristics: $t(682)$ | 0.66 | 1.31 | 0.89 | 0.15 | -0.28 | 2.67** |
| β | .025 | .051 | .034 | .006 | -.011 | .101 |
| Situation: $t(682)$ | 0.23 | -0.79 | -2.11* | 1.31 | -0.07 | 3.85*** |
| β | .009 | -.031 | -.082 | .052 | -.003 | .149 |
| Self-blame: $t(682)$ | 5.61*** | 0.98 | 3.11** | 0.12 | 1.41 | -1.99* |
| β | .216 | .038 | .121 | .005 | .056 | -.077 |
| Model: $F(4, 682)$ | 9.87*** | 2.99* | 7.84*** | 2.31 | 0.70 | 8.07*** |
| R^2_{adj} | 0.049 | 0.011 | 0.038 | 0.008 | 0.002 | 0.040 |

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

of cutting ties, $t(682) = -2.11$, $p = .035$. Attributions to the self (self-blame) were related to greater feelings of hurt, $t(682) = 5.61$, $p < .001$, and greater likelihood of cutting ties, $t(682) = 3.11$, $p = .002$. The most interesting results pertained to forgiveness: attributions to the situation increased forgiveness, $t(682) = 3.85$, $p < .001$, while self-blame decreased it, $t(682) = -1.99$, $p = .047$; and attributions to intrinsic characteristics of the betrayer decreased forgiveness, $t(682) = -3.18$, $p = .002$, but attributions to group characteristics increased it, $t(682) = 2.67$, $p = .008$.

2.2.4 | Differences between genders, ages and countries

I finally investigated whether participants' age, gender and country impacted the betrayal narrative they had reported. The entire statistical output is reported in [ESM4.1–ESM4.5](#).

Betrayal narratives categorisation

Men and women did not differ in their likelihood of reporting one type of betrayal or another, Wald's $\chi^2(8) = 12.95$, $p = .11$, Cox and Snell's $R^2 = .014$ (see [ESM4.1](#)). There was, however, an effect of age, $F(8, 936) = 3.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.031$ ([ESM4.2](#)). Multiple comparisons with LSD correction showed that younger respondents were more likely to report cases of cutting ties unexpectedly and revealing secrets, while older respondents were more likely to report manipulation/taking advantage, disappointment of hopes and expectations, and abuse. Finally, we investigated differences between the three countries most represented in the sample: United Kingdom ($n = 639$), Switzerland ($n = 191$) and France ($n = 106$). A GLM analysis (controlling for age and gender) revealed no significant difference across countries, Wald's $\chi^2(8) = 1.75$, $p = .99$.

Relationship to the person who betrayed

There were gender differences in the relative occurrence of different relationship, Wald's $\chi^2(4) = 44.32$, $p < .001$, Cox and Snell's $R^2 = 0.048$ (see [ESM4.3](#)). Specifically, women were more likely to report a betrayal by a very close friend or by a friend/acquaintance, while men were more likely to report a betrayal by someone at the workplace. There were no differences for betrayal by a partner nor by a family member. There was also an effect of age, $F(4, 940) = 23.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.091$. Younger respondents were more likely to report betrayal by a very close friend, and older respondents were more likely to report betrayal by someone at the

workplace. Again, there was no significant difference across countries, Wald's $\chi^2(4) = 1.21$, $p = .88$ (analysis controlling for age and gender).

Emotional response, behavioural response and causal attributions

There was very little variation across demographics. Women reported higher feelings of hurt than men, $F(1, 916) = 46.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.048$, and slightly higher anger, $F(1, 916) = 6.22$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2_p = 0.007$. They also made more attributions to intrinsic characteristics of the betrayer, $F(1, 667) = 4.52$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2_p = 0.007$. In addition, younger participants were more likely to forgive the person who had betrayed them, $F(1, 916) = 14.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.015$, slightly less likely to cut ties, $F(1, 916) = 4.23$, $p = .040$, $\eta^2_p = 0.005$, and more likely to self-blame for the betrayal, $F(1, 667) = 4.77$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2_p = 0.007$. No other effect was significant (see complete output in [ESM4.4](#) and [ESM4.5](#)).

3 | DISCUSSION

We all have much to gain from social relationships: support, approbation, love and other psychological and material resources. Yet, all relationships come with a risk, that of a future betrayal. This is “the price one must pay” (Couch et al., 1999, p. 452). The present paper proposes a quantitative analysis of more than 900 betrayal narratives to determine what types of betrayal people spontaneously describe as well as their response (emotional and behavioural) and causal attributions for the episode.

3.1 | Summary of the present findings

The present results are globally consistent with the original work of Jones, Couch and colleagues, conducted some 30 years ago (Couch et al., 1999; W. H. Jones et al., 1997; W. H. Jones et al., 2001; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994), and with more recent work focusing on specific forms of interpersonal offences and violations (Boon et al., 2021; Rapske et al., 2010). They show that unfaithfulness from a romantic partner is the most commonly reported form of betrayal. However, betrayal cannot be reduced to infidelity: we also found frequent occurrences of lying, revealing secrets, manipulating and taking advantage, gossiping and slandering, cutting ties unexpectedly, and failing to offer assistance during time of need. Many cases also pertained, generally, to disappointing one's hopes and expectations, which comes back to the conceptualisation of betrayal as a breach of subjective expectations regarding the behaviour of others in a relationship (Fitness, 2001; Holmes, 1991). There were also rarer but serious cases of physical and psychological abuse (see Couch et al., 1999; Couch et al., 2017; W. H. Jones et al., 1997; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994).

Similar to previous work, we found that most of the reported betrayals involved a close friend or a partner, while smaller numbers involved friends or family members. It is particularly noteworthy that many cases pertained to the workplace (W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994), with a number of participants describing cases of manipulation/taking advantage of them, disappointing their expectations, engaging in slander, etc. Betrayals by a close friend were more likely to be reported by younger respondents as well as by women (Couch et al., 1999; Hojjat et al., 2017), while betrayals in the workplace were more frequent among older respondents as well as among men (Couch et al., 1999; W. H. Jones et al., 1997; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994); betrayals by a partner, in contrast, were similarly reported by men and women (Couch et al., 1999; Feldman et al., 2000), all of which is consistent with previous work.

Emotional and behavioural responses to betrayal varied very little with gender and age. This lack of difference—again consistent with previous work (Boon et al., 2021; Fitness & Fletcher, 1993; Haden & Hojjat, 2006; Hojjat et al., 2017; Joskowicz-Jablonek & Leiser, 2013; Leary et al., 1998; McCullough, 2001; McCullough et al., 1998; Rapske et al., 2010)—suggests that while age and gender make people more likely to experience certain forms of

betrayal by specific others, the psychological mechanisms that underpin the evaluation and response to betrayal are rather universal. Overall, then, the most common behavioural response was to cut ties with the betrayer or to confront them. Forgiveness seemed possible in some cases, especially those that had triggered less anger (Boon et al., 2021; Fitness, 2001; Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2017; McCullough, 2001; Rapske et al., 2010). Revenge was rarely reported overall and was more common in cases that had triggered more anger (Hojjat et al., 2017; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 2013).

Finally, we found that causal attributions for the betrayal influenced the emotional and behavioural responses of the victim (Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009). I drew here from social categorisation theory and attribution theories and considered two types of external attributions (to the situation and to the victim herself, that is, self-blame) and two types of internal attributions (to intrinsic and group-based characteristics of the betrayer). These distinctions, going beyond a mere internal–external distinction (Finkel et al., 2002) proved fruitful. Notably, internal attributions to intrinsic characteristics of the betrayer were related to more anger and greater likelihood of cutting ties or confront the betrayer, and lesser forgiveness. Internal attributions to group characteristics of the betrayer, in contrast, were not related to the emotional and behavioural responses except for forgiveness with which it was positively related.

Therefore, it seems that past findings that internal attributions (to the betrayer) increase blame and decrease forgiveness (Chan, 2009; Dirks et al., 2009; Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009) mostly apply to attributions to intrinsic characteristics, such as the person's personality or temperament. Attributions to group characteristics, such as the person's cultural background, lead to a different reaction, including greater forgiveness. I am aware of one piece of work that similarly identified culture as an effective justification for interpersonal violation (Feldman et al., 2000). Future research would need to investigate this issue further; attributions to group characteristics could, for example, play a key role when it comes to assessing the trustworthiness of people who share the betrayer's group membership (i.e., generalised expectations)—the same way attributions to internal stable factors are used to assess the likelihood that the betrayer re-offends us in the future (Elangovan et al., 2007).

3.2 | Strengths of the research

This research presents two strengths. First, it offers an update to the research of betrayal narratives and finds a remarkable stability in the types of episodes that people report. When it comes to the people who are more likely to betray us, and to what they can do to us, it seems that not much has changed in the past 30 years.

Second, and beyond a mere replication of past findings, the present research also offers a very comprehensive view of betrayal narratives. As noted elsewhere (Joskowicz–Jablonek & Leiser, 2013; Kowalski et al., 2003), research on betrayal is scattered as studies tend to focus on one specific form at the time. In contrast, the present study offers a comprehensive view of the different violations that people can suffer from different others. This allows for direct comparisons between different combinations of actors and acts (e.g., disloyalty by a partner vs. friend, deception and lies by a family member vs. in the workplace; see Table 5 and ESM3). Such comprehensive view remains rare in the literature (with exceptions; see e.g., Feldman et al., 2000, for an investigation of disloyalty vs. revealing secrets × a friend vs. partner). Past work has also heavily relied on student samples (Boon et al., 2021; Couch et al., 2017; Finkel et al., 2002; Kowalski et al., 2003; Leary et al., 1998; Rapske et al., 2010); here in contrast I included both students and respondents from the general population, thus increasing the reliability and generalisability of the findings.

This work has implications for researchers and practitioners alike who are interested in aversive interpersonal behaviours (see for example, Kowalski, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2003) as it highlights the variety of events that people encounter in their daily life and informs us about their responses and potential consequences for the relationship (e.g., forgiving or taking revenge) depending on the act itself and the actor. The present work is also helpful for experimental researchers working with vignettes or imagined scenarios (Elangovan et al., 2007; Feldman et al., 2000; Haden & Hojjat, 2006) as it informs about the types of betrayal and relationships that are described more frequently by laypeople and student populations alike, as well as differences related to age and gender.

3.3 | Limitations and future directions

Some limitations to the present work must be recognised. First, the free-recall approach makes it difficult to compare specific combinations of betrayal type and relationship that were less frequently reported. We cannot conclude about the overall prevalence of betrayal situations in one's life, only comment on the cases that people decided to report and that were probably most salient in their mind (see Couch et al., 1999; Couch et al., 2017; W. H. Jones et al., 1997; W. H. Jones et al., 2001; W. H. Jones & Burdette, 1994). As in any free-recall procedure, there is also the risk of reporting bias, either because the answer is coloured by a social desirability bias or because participants are motivated to distort their story to present themselves in a more favourable light. It is worth highlighting again that what qualifies as betrayal is subjective as it depends on the perceived violating of (sometimes implicit) norms and expectations surrounding people's behaviour in interpersonal relationships.

While this procedure has the advantage of letting the participants express themselves in their own words (Couch et al., 1999), future studies aiming to address more specific research questions might want to use a more directive approach and ask participants to recall specific types of betrayal (the risk being that not everybody has an episode to report). A within-participant approach, comparing one's assessment of different betrayal situations, could also provide valuable insights. It also remains for future studies to address why betrayal occurred in the first place. I focused here on the victim's perspective and did not assess the betrayer's motives nor their reaction following the betrayal. However, it might be important to consider both the perspective of the victim and the perpetrator (Couch et al., 1999; Finkel et al., 2002; Hannon et al., 2010; W. H. Jones et al., 1997). Finally, it will be useful to connect the typology of different forms of betrayal with potential ways to restore trust (Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2017). Some have highlighted how different strategies (e.g., apologies vs. denial) are more or less effective for repairing trust depending on the nature of the transgression (e.g., competence vs. integrity-based) and the causal attribution for the transgression (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002; Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, & Dirks, 2007; Finkel et al., 2002; Hannon et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2006; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004). In a similar approach, there will be much to learn in directly comparing different types of betrayal and their challenges for trust repair and forgiveness (see Chan, 2009). The present results contribute to developing a better typology of betrayal in interpersonal relationships and I hope they can inspire further fruitful research.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at <https://osf.io/7gyrz/>.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Studies 1–3 included additional questions (on interpersonal trust, goal systems, etc.) that do not pertain to the present research question and are not discussed here.
- ² Despite the study being advertised for adults aged 18 or older, two participants (one in the sample of UK students and one in the French-speaking community sample) reported an age of 17. They were still retained in the sample for analyses.
- ³ Let us note that the questions assessing causal attributions were not part of the preregistration for Study 4.

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