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The Things We Do to Each Other: A Study of Betrayal Narratives From the Betrayer's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

All trusting relationships come with a risk: that of experiencing betrayal. Most of the existing research, however, has focused on the perspective of the trustor—the person who was betrayed. In contrast, the perspective of the trustee, or betrayer, has largely been overlooked. This oversight leaves a gap in the psychological understanding of the reasons and circumstances that can lead a person to betray their close ones. This paper contributes to addressing this gap. Building on the betrayal narrative procedure, we collected more than 1100 betrayal narratives from the point of view of the betrayer, among community participants and university students across three languages and five countries (France, Germany, Switzerland, the USA, the UK). We provide here an analysis of these narratives, investigating the typology of betrayal as well as the type of relationship, behavioral response of the person betrayed, and causal attributions offered by the betrayer. Our results highlight a variety of types of betrayal and of relationships in which these occur. They also illustrate the different developments of such incidents, ranging from forgiving to cutting ties or taking revenge. As such, these results contribute to developing a better typology of betrayal in personal relationships.

1 | Introduction

There is much to gain from social relationships: support, approbation, love, and other psychological and material resources. But all relationships come with a risk—that of being betrayed. This is "the price one must pay" (Couch et al. 1999, 452) to hope and reap the benefits of our social life. Psychological research provides many insights into the nature of betrayal, documenting the damage it can cause to the relationship between the trustor and the trustee (e.g., Jones et al. 1997) and the profound impact it can have on the trustor, ranging from (sometimes considerable) distress to depression and/or anxiety disorders (Couch et al. 2017; Rachman 2010) and even betrayal trauma (Babcock and DePrince 2012; Freyd et al. 2005). However, most of the existing research has focused on the perspective of the trustor, that is, the person who was betrayed. In contrast, the perspective of the trustee, or betrayer, has largely been overlooked. This oversight leaves a gap in the psychological understanding of the reasons and circumstances that can lead a person to betray their close ones. Although accounts from betrayed individuals may shed light on their personal perspectives on the event, these are likely to be biased in systematic ways (e.g., fundamental attribution error). Furthermore, betrayed individuals can infer but do not have access to the betrayer's internal states (their reasoning, thoughts, emotions, and the impact these may have had). As such, we argue it is essential to also consider the betrayer's perspective to fully understand why, how, and when betrayal may occur.

Building on the betrayal narrative procedure (Couch et al. 1999; Jones et al. 1997; Lalot 2023), we collected more than 1100 betrayal narratives from the point of view of the betrayer, among laypeople and university students across five countries and three languages. We provide here an analysis of these narratives,

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investigating the typology of betrayal as well as the type of relationship, behavioral response of the person betrayed, and causal attributions offered by the betrayer.

1.1 | Defining Betrayal

Betrayal is often 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 and Shapiro 1998, 548). It is thus akin to a breach of trust, or trust violation (as often labeled in the trust research literature). Unpacking this proposed definition suggests that a betrayal necessitates that: (a) A relationship exists between two (or more) people, (b) this relationship is defined by a set of rules, either mutually agreed or determined by social norms, (c) one person has positive expectations of the other (i.e., trust), and (d) the other breaches this trust by violating expectations. This means that a violation in the absence of preexisting trust would qualify as harm but not betrayal, since no trust was betrayed in the first place.

Elangovan and Shapiro's definition constrains betrayal to a voluntary act. However, others also consider the case of involuntary actions; specifically, accidental betrayals are cases where "the actor was the cause of an outcome, although he or she did not intend or foresee the outcome" (Chan 2009, 263; see also Leary et al. 1998). What constitutes a betrayal is ultimately subjective: it depends on the trustor's expectations about how others should behave in a relationship and the causal attribution they generate for the event (Chan 2009; Elangovan and Shapiro 1998; Fitness 2001; Holmes 1991).

Building on this previous work, we offer the following working definition: Betrayal is the subjective perception of a violation—intentional or unintentional—of core relational expectations by a trusted other, resulting in perceived or actual threat to the individual's emotional, relational, or physical well-being. This perception may be held by the trustor (i.e., the person betrayed), the trustee (i.e., the betrayer themselves) or a third party observing the events.

1.2 | A Typology of Betrayal in Everyday Life

In the late 1990s, one research team led by Jones, Couch, and colleagues conducted an extensive exploration of the various forms of betrayal people encountered in their daily lives (Couch et al. 1999; Jones and Burdette 1994; Jones et al. 1997, 2001). They asked participants to recall and describe a personal betrayal experience (so-called "betrayal narrative"), aiming to categorize these into different types across a range of relationships. They found participants often cited cases of infidelity as well as telling lies, betraying confidences, inadequate emotional support, excessive criticism, and ignoring the person; and these happened in relationships with one's romantic partner, but also family, friends, and in the workplace.

This work was recently updated by Lalot (2023) who utilized a similar procedure but aimed to increase generalizability (recruiting university students and community samples from different countries above and beyond the United States, on which most of the previous research had focused). Strikingly, this work replicated most of Jones and Couch's findings, 30 years apart. It highlights that, although infidelity by a romantic partner remains the most frequently reported type of betrayal, several other experiences were described, such as lying, revealing secrets, manipulating and taking advantage, gossiping and slandering, cutting ties unexpectedly, and failing to offer assistance during a time of need. Many instances also pertained generally to disappointing one's hopes and expectations, in line with the conceptualization of betrayal as a violation of personal expectations within a relationship (Fitness 2001; Holmes 1991). There were also rarer but serious cases of physical and psychological abuse (see also Couch et al. 1999, 2017; Jones and Burdette 1994; Jones et al. 1997). As highlighted in earlier studies, most betrayals involved someone emotionally close, such as a romantic partner or best friend, with fewer cases involving friends and acquaintances as well as family members. A significant number of cases also pertained to workplace settings (see Jones and Burdette 1994).

Lalot (2023) concluded by proposing a nine-type typology of betrayals, which fitted 99.8% of the narratives analyzed. However, this study only considered betrayal narratives from the point of view of the trustor, or the person who was betrayed.

1.3 | The Perspective of the Betrayer

Different theoretical perspectives offer insights into why people may decide to betray others. According to a rational approach (e.g., Elangovan and Shapiro 1998), people would ponder the costs and benefits of both courses of action (betraying versus remaining trustworthy) and choose the one that maximizes their gains and minimizes their costs. The benefits of betraying may include material gains (e.g., when stealing something or lying to obtain a promotion) but also stronger social relationships (e.g., when engaging together in slander against a third party) and the projection of a positive public self-image (e.g., when lying about one's capabilities). Costs, on the other hand, include damages to the relationship with the person betrayed but also to one's reputation (if others learn about the event; Bozoyan and Vogt 2016; Dunbar 2004). Betrayal also tarnishes one's private self-image and self-esteem as one must integrate their "bad" actions into their self-concept (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000).

This first approach fits a personalist perspective, assuming that people make rational decisions and betray when it suits them. Accordingly, Jones and Burdette (1994) developed the Interpersonal Betrayal Scale, an instrument aiming to measure one's general tendency to betray others. Not all betrayals, however, are fully thought through and premeditated. Impulsivity, strong emotions, or a reduced sense of self-control (due, for example, to being intoxicated) may lead people to act before they think and impulsively prioritize selfish motives (e.g., in romantic infidelity; Jones et al. 1997).

Furthermore, group dynamics and peer influence may also play a role (e.g., in cases of slandering or bullying). Finally, there might be unexpected circumstances that hinder or accelerate one course of action. In sum, there may be both internal and

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external causes for betraying, as well as more or less stable and controllable ones (Tomlinson and Mayer 2009).

Whereas the rational model focuses on internal causes (i.e., within the betrayer), other accounts highlight the role of such external causes. Morrison and Robinson (1997), for instance, distinguish between issues of inability (e.g., when a promise could not be kept because of unforeseen circumstances) versus unwillingness (e.g., when it was intentionally decided; see also Pearce and Henderson 2000). More recently, Chan (2009) developed an attribution-based model that distinguishes between incidental and intentional betrayals. The focus here is not on the locus of attribution but rather on perceived intent: Incidental betrayals are situations where the perpetrator pursues their own goal and harms the victim as collateral damage. The intent, however, was not primarily to harm. Intentional betrayals, on the other hand, are situations where the primary goal of the perpetrator is to harm the victim, either in a direct way (personalistic betrayal) or to take revenge (reciprocal betrayal).

Although these different models shed light on the different motives that may push one to betray, they remain mostly theoretical. A strong focus on industrial and organizational psychology also makes some pieces quite specific and not fully suitable for the study of betrayal in personal relationships beyond the workplace. Furthermore, there is a paucity of empirical evidence testing whether these fit people's representations and experiences in everyday life. As a notable exception, Jones et al. (1997) collected some betrayal narratives from the point of view of the betrayer (see also Baumeister et al. 1990). They found that many perpetrators provided internal but unstable causes for their behavior, thus reducing their own culpability, and often mentioned external causes or extenuating circumstances. Comparing these results with other narratives collected from the point of view of the victim, the authors note that the latter make more internal and stable attributions (to the betrayer) than the betrayers themselves do, in line with an actor-observer bias (Storms 1973). The present study builds on this work by considering the different types of attribution the betrayer may offer to justify their action: either internal (i.e., personal responsibility), external (i.e., circumstance-based), related to the person betrayed (i.e., other-responsibility), or related to specific characteristics of the personal relationship.

2 | The Present Study

This study aims to expand the scientific understanding of real-life betrayals from the point of view of the person who betrayed. As a first step, we seek to provide an overview of the types of betrayal people spontaneously recall having engaged in, depending on the type of relationship (romantic partner, family, friend, workplace). We thus rely on the betrayal narrative procedure (Couch et al. 1999; Jones et al. 1997; Lalot 2023) to collect and analyze narratives from the point of view of the perpetrator. This approach allows for a direct comparison of the type of betrayal people spontaneously recall as the perpetrator (from the present data) and as the person betrayed (from Lalot 2023). To provide deeper context, we also assess interpersonal closeness and relationship length, and when the event occurred. Further, we consider the behavioral response of the person betrayed (i.e., confronting, cutting ties, seeking revenge, or forgiving). This allows for an investigation of the different resolutions of the betrayal situation as prompted by the person betrayed. To better understand the reasons that might have led to the betrayal, we finally measure the causal attributions offered by the betrayer. Following Lalot (2023), we distinguish between three main types of attributions: internal (i.e., to causes within the perpetrator), external-personal (i.e., to the person betrayed), and external-situational (i.e., to circumstances). We also include specificities of the relationship and feelings for the person betrayed as additional causes, aiming to reflect the greater complexity of ongoing relationships beyond a mere internal–external opposition.

Expanding previous work, we collected data from university students as well as community samples in several countries: the USA, the UK, France, Germany, and Switzerland. We aimed to move beyond a purely USA-centered sample to investigate commonalities and differences between countries. While those reflect the main countries whose language our team speaks fluently, they also provide interesting comparisons. For instance, they differ in their degree of relational mobility, that is, the "freedom and opportunity a society affords individuals to choose and dispose of interpersonal relationships based on personal preference" (Thomson et al. 2018, 7521). Of the countries presently considered, France has the highest relational mobility score, followed by the USA. The UK is close to the global average, whereas Germany has relatively low relational mobility (in fact, one of the lowest in Western Europe; Thomson et al. 2018). People in societies with higher relational mobility report higher generalized trust as well as greater self-disclosure and intimacy toward friends and romantic partners, which may have implications for betrayal experiences, although this remains to be explored.

The investigation was approved by the ethics committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Kent and the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Basel. We made it clear to participants that they did not need to provide much detail about their betrayal narrative and could quit the study at any point if they wanted to. Data were collected between April and December 2024. This work was exploratory in nature, and we did not make a priori hypotheses on the types of betrayal that participants could report more frequently, nor about their emotional and behavioral impact. The study design, materials, sample specifications, and rules for exclusion, however, were preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/f9cd-mn88.pdf.

3 | Methods

3.1 | Participants and Procedure

The survey took the form of an online questionnaire about "personal relationships and life experiences." It was available in three languages (English, German, and French) and distributed through different channels: to university students participating in exchange for course credits, to Prolific participants, and to laypeople recruited through ads on various social media platforms who participated on a voluntary basis. We aimed for a minimum of 100 respondents per subsample (language and type of sample) to allow for meaningful comparisons.

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A total of 1308 participants completed the survey. There was no missing data. As preregistered, we excluded those who failed an attention check embedded in the questionnaire ($n = 44$). We also excluded the few cases where participants declared having never betrayed anyone, as well as those who reported not an instance of having betrayed someone, but of being betrayed by another ($n = 133$). The final sample for analysis was therefore $N = 1131$, including 517 men, 598 women, 15 other/non-binary, and 1 undisclosed, of a mean age of 35.41 (SD = 16.46; range: 18–84). There were 639 English, 259 German, and 233 French speakers. Most came from the UK ($n = 382$), the USA ($n = 252$), Switzerland ($n = 212$), France ($n = 160$), and Germany ($n = 105$). Demographics by sample are reported in Supporting Information, SM1.

Sensitivity power analyses determined that the sample size would allow detecting correlations as small as $r = 0.05$ with 95% power. In a one-way ANOVA with eight groups, it would detect main effects as small as $d = 0.28$ with 95% power (GPower 3.1.9.2; Faul et al. 2007).

3.2 | Materials

3.2.1 | Betraying Narratives

We adapted instructions from Lalot (2023), first defining 'betrayal' and then asking participants to report one such event. Specifically, they read:

> 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 betrayed someone. Don't look too hard, just focus on the first event that spontaneously comes 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. It could be an event about which you feel sad or satisfied, guilty or justified, and so on. Please take a few seconds to try and recall the event.

Participants were then asked to use an open field to describe, in a few words, what had happened. Stories ranged from 1 to 257 words ($M = 27.00$, SD = 28.87). A minority of participants ($n = 9$) chose not to disclose their narrative but still answered all other quantitative questions. They were retained for analysis.

3.2.2 | Additional Information About the Betrayal

We then followed up with additional questions about the betrayal participants had just recalled. Most questions were taken or adapted from Lalot (2023), who had demonstrated the measures' face validity. Participants first indicated their relationship to the person whom they betrayed: a romantic partner/a very close friend/a friend/an acquaintance/someone in their close family/someone in their extended family/someone at their workplace (a colleague, employer or employee)/other.

We used an adapted Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron et al. 1992) to assess how close they felt to the person before the event (7-point scale with visual depictions of pairs of circles increasingly overlapping). Aron et al. (1992) demonstrated the IOS's convergent validity (e.g., $r = 0.33$ with the Relationship Closeness Inventory, $r = 0.31$ with the Subjective Closeness Index) and predictive validity (e.g., $r = 0.46$ with self-reported maintenance of the romantic relationship 3 months later).

Participants also 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; and how long they had known the person prior to the event (numerical answer; number of years).

3.2.3 | Behavioral Response of the Person Betrayed

We then turned to the reaction of the person who was betrayed (as reported by the participant). A first question asked whether the person ever learnt about the betrayal: Almost immediately/later or much later/never/I am not sure. Participants then reported how much the person had engaged in four different behaviors upon learning about the betrayal (these questions were not displayed for participants who said the person never learnt about it): "After the event, did the person cut ties with you?", "Did the person confront you about what you did?", "Did the person try to take revenge on you?", "Did the person forgive you?" (7-point scale, 1 = Not at all, 7 = Completely; see Lalot 2023).

3.2.4 | Causal Attributions

Participants finally indicated their causal attributions for the betrayal. Specifically, they indicated how much "responsibility for the events lies..." (a) with yourself, (b) with the other person, (c) with reasons specific to the situation, (d) with reasons specific to your relationship with the person, (e) with your feelings for the person (7-point scale, 1 = Not at all, 7 = Completely). As these last two items were strongly correlated, $r(1118) = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$, we aggregated them into a single average score.[1] Correlations between all measures are reported in Table 1.

3.3 | Data Analysis

3.3.1 | Coding Procedure for Betrayal Category

We aimed to categorize the betraying narratives in discrete categories. Following Lalot (2023), we relied on a nine-category typology: (a) Manipulating or taking advantage of the person, (b) Being disloyal or unfaithful, (c) Deceiving, lying or misleading, (d) Revealing secrets, (e) Cutting ties unexpectedly, (f) Failing to offer assistance during time of need, (g)

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TABLE 1 | Correlations between all measures.

		Pearson's correlations									
#	Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Time since event	−0.01	−0.05	0.02	−0.07*	0.00	−0.07*	0.05	0.15***	0.06	−0.07*
2	Relationship length		0.23***	−0.06	−0.03	−0.03	0.06	0.03	−0.12***	−0.03	0.10**
3	Closeness			0.21***	−0.17***	0.03	0.02	0.24***	−0.13***	0.02	0.21***
4	Attribution: Internal				−0.56***	0.01	−0.10***	0.17***	−0.10**	−0.11***	0.13***
5	Attribution: Other blame					0.26***	0.13***	−0.05	0.16***	0.21***	−0.18***
6	Attribution: Relationship						0.11***	0.13***	0.11**	0.20***	−0.09**
7	Attribution: Circumstances							−0.04	−0.02	0.03	0.03
8	Response: Confront								0.05	0.26***	0.04
9	Response: Cut ties									0.20***	−0.52***
10	Response: Revenge										−0.26***
11	Response: Forgiveness										

Note: Time since event = how long ago the event happened (greater scores mean further away in time). *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Disappointing the person's hopes or expectations, (h) Slander, denigrate, or defame, (i) Physical or psychological abuse, plus (j) other.

Participants were asked to provide a categorization themselves ("If you had to put a label on the betrayal you just recalled, which of the following categories would you say it best fits in?"). Three researchers, blind to the participants' categorization, additionally coded all narratives (each narrative was coded by one researcher, distributed depending on the researchers' native language). This initial coding showed 59% agreement with participants' categorization, which is similar to what Lalot (2023) obtained with a similar procedure (i.e., 59%–63% agreement). Formally, this coding would indicate weak reliability (Krippendorff's alpha = 0.51). However, it is important to note this does not reflect agreement between two researchers coding the narratives, but between one researcher and one self-rating participant. We noticed some systematic patterns of disagreement (e.g., several cases of what we would label "infidelity" were categorized by the participants themselves as "lies"). When reviewing these narratives in the team, we easily reached a consensus in the vast majority of cases (in cases where the text was ambiguous or extremely brief, we used the categorization the participants had themselves provided; see Lalot 2023). We are therefore confident in the reliability of our final ratings.

3.3.2 | Analysis

Analysis included descriptive analysis, correlations, and ANOVAs (with Tukey HSD correction for multiple comparisons). All analyses were conducted with RStudio version 2025.09.2+418. Data, materials, and code for analysis are publicly available on the OSF: https://osf.io/5bpz4.

4 | Results

The results are organized as follows: we first describe the betrayal category, type of relationship, and time since event—that is, who did what, to whom, and when? We report some chosen quotes to illustrate each betrayal category. For brevity purposes, results pertaining to other aspects of the relationship, specifically interpersonal closeness and relationship length, are reported in SM6. We then turn to the betrayer's causal attributions for the event, testing for differences between different types of relationships. The next part of the results considers the reactions of the person who was betrayed: confronting, cutting ties, taking revenge, or forgiving. Finally, we test for differences across countries.

Given the similar procedure, the present research allows for a direct comparison with Lalot (2023), that is, between the

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perspectives of betraying and betrayed individuals. Where relevant, we report the findings observed by Lalot (2023) alongside ours and discuss the differences and similarities.

4.1 | Betrayal Category, Type of Relationship, and Time Since Event (Who Did What to Whom When?)

4.1.1 | Betrayal Category

Virtually all narratives fit our nine-category typology, with only four (0.4%) categorized as "other" (see Table 2; analysis by sample is reported in SM2). The most frequently reported form of betrayal was disloyalty and unfaithfulness (31.6%), most often toward one's romantic partner.

> I kissed a work colleague while intoxicated at a Xmas party (52-year-old woman).

> I dated someone else, even though my relationship with my partner was already at a point where you could expect exclusivity or should definitely let them know if you were dating someone else, and I didn't do that (25-year-old man).

TABLE 2 | Classification of betraying narratives.

	Betrayer's perspective (present data)		Betrayed person's perspective (Lalot 2023)	
Betrayal category	**Freq.**	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**
Being disloyal or unfaithful	357	31.7%	218	23.0%
Disappointing the person's hopes or expectations	257	22.7%	200	21.1%
Revealing secrets	169	14.9%	82	8.6%
Deceiving, lying, or misleading	147	13.0%	140	14.8%
Manipulating or taking advantage of the person	62	5.5%	105	11.1%
Cutting ties unexpectedly	60	5.3%	66	7.0%
Slander, denigrate, or defame	36	3.2%	76	8.0%
Failing to offer assistance during time of need	33	2.9%	44	4.6%
Physical and psychological abuse	6	0.5%	14	1.5%
Other	4	0.4%	2	0.2%
Total	1131	100%	947	100%

This was followed by disappointment of hopes and expectations (22.7%), a vast category that covered different situations from breaking promises, canceling plans, prioritizing other people, and so on.

> I didn't do much to celebrate a major birthday in my partner's life. I thought they didn't really care, so I didn't do anything special besides a nice dinner (29-year-old woman).

> I told a friend I would help them with moving house but when it came closer to moving day I backed out (34-year-old man).

> I've known this friend the longest out of all my friends but I feel I spend less time with her compared to my other friends, that makes me feel guilty sometimes (19-year-old man).

There were also a number of narratives pertaining to revealing secrets (14.9%) as well as lying (13.0%).

> I accidentally mentioned my sister's sexual orientation to a friend, although my sister wasn't completely out yet (31-year-old woman).

> In a friendship on the Internet, I invented a life for myself, even to the point of saying that my dad had been shot, when it wasn't true (31-year-old woman).

Other forms were less frequent. We count 5.5% of cases pertaining to manipulating or taking advantage of someone, and 5.3% of cutting ties unexpectedly.

> We were both working as freelancers for a company. My friend was more likely to get a big job than I so I told the company that he was working for another company as well (which he was) and that therefore I would have more time to devote to the project. I got the job and he was dismissed (73-year-old man).

> I stopped being friends with a girl because I was afraid that others in my class would think I was weird because I was friends with her (21-year-old man).

Finally, a few cases were classified as slander (3.2%), failing to offer assistance during a time of need (2.9%), and physical or psychological abuse (0.5%; mostly bullying or harassing).

> Me and a friend in college liked the same girl. Well I betrayed him by telling the girl he was a player and all so she would think less of him (35-year-old man).

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> She was my best friend, she really wasn't doing well and I didn't realise it in time, I couldn't help her and she turned to people who had a very bad influence on her. We were still really young, she's better now but she'll never be the same (20-year-old woman).

Comparing the present figures with those reported by Lalot (2023) showed striking similarities (see Table 2).

TABLE 3 | Relationship to the person who was betrayed.

	Betrayer's perspective (present data)		Betrayed person's perspective (Lalot 2023)	
Category	**Freq.**	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**
Romantic partner	309	27.3%	284	29.9%
Friend	291	25.7%	148	15.6%
Very close friend	188	16.6%	258	27.2%
Close family	138	12.2%	117	12.3%
Workplace	106	9.4%	122	12.9%
Acquaintance	64	5.7%	12	1.3%
Extended family	16	1.4%	8	0.8%
Other	19	1.7%	—	—
Total	1131	100%	949	100%

Regardless of whether the participant was the betrayer (present data) or the betrayed party (Lalot 2023), percentages across categories of betrayal were almost similar (for instance, disappointing hopes and expectations: 23% of cases from the point of view of the betrayer, vs. 21% of cases from the point of view of the betrayed person; lying: 13% vs. 15%). Only in the more severe forms of betrayal did differences emerge: manipulating was only reported in 6% of our cases, vs. 11% in Lalot (2023), and abuse in 0.5% here vs. 1.5% in Lalot (2023)—and these differences, although meaningful in relative terms, remain small in raw metric. This suggests the existence of a shared mental model of what counts as betrayal, beyond private feelings. We come back to this point in the general discussion.

4.1.2 | Type of Relationship

The person who was betrayed (see Table 3; analysis by sample is reported in SM3) was most often a romantic partner (27.3%) or a friend (25.7%). Other cases included a very close friend (16.6%), a close family member (12.2%), and someone at the workplace (9.4%). For simplification purposes, in the following analyses, we excluded the few narratives that were classified as "other," and we grouped "friend" with "acquaintance," and members of "extended family" with "close family."

The types of relationship were also very similar to what Lalot (2023) observed from the betrayed person's perspective (for instance, cases involving a romantic partner: 27% here vs. 30% in Lalot (2023); close family: 12% vs. 12%; workplace: 10% vs. 13%). Only two categories were not so well aligned: very close friend (17% here vs. 27% in Lalot 2023) and friend (26% vs. 16%).

TABLE 4 | Cross-table: betrayal category and type of relationship.

Cross-tabulation (*N*)	Friend/ acquaintance	Romantic partner	Very close friend	Family	Workplace	Total
Being disloyal or unfaithful	47	222	49	24	11	357
Disappointing the person's hopes or expectations	103	35	31	42	38	257
Revealing secrets	80	5	42	26	14	169
Deceiving, lying, or misleading	43	32	26	32	12	147
Manipulating or taking advantage of the person	20	4	7	11	18	62
Cutting ties unexpectedly	33	7	14	2	3	60
Slander, denigrate, or defame	14	0	11	4	7	36
Failing to offer assistance during time of need	9	3	7	11	3	33
Physical and psychological abuse	5	0	0	1	0	6
Other	1	1	1	1	0	4
Total	355	309	188	154	106	1112

Note: The type-of-relationship was simplified by grouping "friend" and "acquaintance," as well as "close" with "extended" family. The "other" betraying narratives implying an "other" type of relationship have been excluded here, resulting in $N = 1112$.

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4.1.3 | Type of Relationship × Betrayal Category

Table 4 shows the combinations of betrayal category and type of relationship. A full table with all line and column percentages can also be found in SM4. The analysis reveals, notably, that most betrayals involving one's romantic partner were cases of disloyalty (most often sexual infidelity). However, other cases of disloyalty concerned friends or family members:

> For fear of ending up in prison for a story that was of little importance in the end, I preferred to give up my friend's name because the story we had prepared in advance to protect him didn't hold up against the police (24-year-old man).

> My sister had invited a friend to spend the vacations with our family. Her friend and I ganged up on my sister several times during the vacation (44-year-old man).

Betrayals involving friends and acquaintances were often disappointments of hopes and expectations, or cases of revealing secrets.

> I was supposed to help this person revise for a final exam, but as I didn't feel able to help him, I canceled at the last minute and so this person was left to revise alone after having expected me to be by his side (27-year-old woman).

> I shared texts that a person sent to me with others. These texts were sent to me in confidence and I did not keep them private (42-year-old woman).

In the workplace, participants mostly reported revealing secrets, manipulating or taking advantage, and disappointing expectations.

> I reported a colleague for a relatively minor infraction because I found him personally annoying (41-year-old man).

> I recorded a person without their knowledge to keep information about them. When they asked me if I'd recorded them, I said no (30-year-old woman).

> I chose to leave a job when I had said I was going to stay, and also at a time when two other colleagues were leaving which would leave things in a precarious position (31-year-old woman).

4.1.4 | Time Since Event

The betrayals reported had happened at all sorts of times, ranging from just a few months ago to more than 10 years ago. However, most events were from the distant past, with up to a third of narratives (32.1%) pertaining to more than 10 years ago (10 to 5 years ago: 18.7%, 5 to 2 years ago: 18.6%, 2 to 1 year ago: 11.1%, 12 to 6 months ago: 6.2%, 6 to 3 months ago: 4.2%, 3 months ago or less: 9.2%; analysis by sample is reported in SM5).

> It was when I was a teenager and I stole my best friend's boyfriend even though I didn't fancy him just because I could. It still plays on my mind (55-year-old woman, episode happened "more than ten years ago").

> We made a promise not to eat sweets for a month. I didn't stick to the promise and didn't tell my partner the truth during our challenge (26-year-old man, episode happened "three months ago or less").

4.2 | The Betrayer's Causal Attributions

We then turned to the betrayer's causal attributions for the event. Participants overall recognized a large part of direct responsibility, with high scores of causal attributions to internal causes (i.e., to themselves; $M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.72$). Conversely, they more rarely blamed the person betrayed ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 2.04$) or specificities of the relationship ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.90$). Attributions to circumstances (i.e., "the situation", $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.74$) fell in between.

Comparisons between types of relationships are reported in Table 5. They reveal that participants self-attributed the greatest blame for betrayals that involved their romantic partner and, to an extent, a very close friend. In contrast, self-blame was lowest for betrayals in the workplace (friend/acquaintance and family felt in between). Similarly, attributions to reasons specific to the relationship were highest for the romantic partner and lowest for the workplace (with best friend, friend/acquaintance, and family falling in between). Blame on the person betrayed was low overall, except for cases in the workplace. In fact, this was the only type of relationship where blame on the person betrayed was almost as high as self-blame (i.e., internal attribution). On the other hand, attributions to external circumstances were not a function of the type of relationship. Comparisons between types of betrayal revealed very few significant differences; for brevity purposes, those are reported in SM7.

The pattern of attribution was globally coherent with that observed in Lalot (2023) from the point of view of the person betrayed (see Table 5): in both cases, attributions to the betrayer were highest, followed by circumstances, and finally the person betrayed. However, it is interesting to note that, at least descriptively, both protagonists tend to blame themselves more than the other did (i.e., higher blame put on the perpetrator by the perpetrator than by the person betrayed, and vice versa).

4.3 | Response of the Person Betrayed

Next, we analyzed how the person who was betrayed reacted to the event (as reported by the participant). In 65% of cases,

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participants reported that the person learnt about the betrayal, either almost immediately after the facts (47%) or some time later (18%). In 23% of cases, they had never learnt about it. In the remaining 12%, the participant was not sure.

> I had a first date scheduled and romantically involved myself with someone else beforehand. I immediately felt guilty and told her straight away (18-year-old man, the person learnt about the betrayal immediately after the fact).

> At the beginning of the relationship, I was still seeing other people because I wasn't sure if I wanted to be in a relationship with this person. I should have told him openly that I was seeing other people, but I didn't do that (30-year-old man, the person never learnt about the betrayal).

Among cases where the person learnt about the betrayal (the questions were not asked when participants reported the person had not learnt about it), most had resulted in some form of confrontation ($M = 4.26$, SD = 2.32), although scores covered the entire 1–7 scale and variance was high. Reports of the person cutting ties were less pronounced ($M = 3.32$, SD = 2.28), as were those of taking revenge ($M = 2.29$, SD = 1.86). Forgiveness was a relatively frequent response, but again with important variations ($M = 4.51$, SD = 1.95).

Comparisons between types of relationships are reported in Table 6. They revealed that confrontation was more likely when a romantic partner or a very close friend was involved; it was least likely in the workplace. Cutting ties was significantly lowest within the family, compared to all other relationships. Conversely, forgiveness was highest in the family, followed by very close friends. It was lowest in the workplace. These differences seem to (at least partly) emerge from interpersonal closeness in different relationships: indeed, the zero-order

TABLE 5 | Causal attributions made by the betrayer depending on the person who was betrayed.

Category: *M* (SD)	Internal attribution	Blame on person betrayed	Relationship	Circumstances
Romantic partner	5.91 (1.43)[a]	2.89 (1.88)[b]	4.41 (1.76)[a]	4.74 (1.75)
Friend/acquaintance	5.47 (1.69)[b]	3.21 (2.01)[b]	3.45 (1.80)[b]	4.78 (1.72)
Very close friend	5.84 (1.45)[ab]	2.94 (2.02)[b]	3.30 (1.93)[b]	5.01 (1.81)
Family	5.39 (1.81)[b]	2.88 (2.03)[b]	3.34 (1.96)[b]	5.12 (1.74)
Workplace	4.33 (2.22)[c]	4.20 (2.26)[a]	2.66 (1.65)[c]	5.18 (1.60)
Effect: $F(4, 1097)$	19.91***	9.85***	24.68***	2.59*
η^2_p	0.068	0.035	0.083	0.009
Total (betrayer's perspective)	5.54 (1.72)	3.12 (2.04)	3.59 (1.90)	4.89 (1.74)
Lalot (2023); betrayed person's perspective	5.16 (1.71)	3.32 (1.91)	n/a	4.52 (1.91)

Note: Each column represents a separate analysis and differences should be read in columns. Different letters (a–c) show relationship categories that differ from each other at $p < 0.05$ in multiple comparisons with Tukey HSD correction. There were no significant differences across categories regarding attributions to circumstances. *$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$.

TABLE 6 | Behavioral responses depending on the person who was betrayed.

Category of betrayal: *M* (SD)	Confrontation	Cut ties	Revenge	Forgiveness
Romantic partner	5.01 (2.12)[a]	3.33 (2.32)[a]	2.61 (1.99)	4.31 (1.97)[bc]
Friend/acquaintance	4.05 (2.23)[b]	3.47 (2.10)[a]	2.17 (1.71)	4.47 (1.79)[bc]
Very close friend	4.36 (2.31)[ab]	3.45 (2.44)[a]	2.41 (1.94)	4.70 (2.13)[ab]
Family	4.28 (2.41)[b]	2.17 (1.88)[b]	2.12 (1.81)	5.16 (1.90)[a]
Workplace	3.00 (2.30)[c]	4.04 (2.36)[a]	1.99 (1.83)	3.93 (1.91)[c]
Effect: $F(4, 854)$	13.24***	11.23***	2.87*	6.43***
η^2_p	0.058	0.050	0.013	0.029
Total (betrayer's perspective)	4.26 (2.32)	3.32 (2.28)	2.29 (1.86)	4.51 (1.95)
Lalot (2023); betrayed person's perspective	4.67 (2.36)	4.35 (2.36)	1.70 (1.46)	3.57 (2.06)

Note: Each column represents a separate analysis and differences should be read in columns. Different letters (a–c) show betrayal categories that differ from each other at $p < 0.05$ in multiple comparisons with Tukey HSD correction. There were no significant differences across categories regarding revenge. *$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$.

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correlations (see Table 1) showed that interpersonal closeness was positively related to confrontation ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$) and to forgiveness ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$), and negatively related to cutting ties ($r = -0.13$, $p < 0.001$). On the other hand, comparisons between types of betrayal only revealed a few significant differences; they are reported in SM8.

Although rates of confrontation and revenge were overall similar to those reported by Lalot (2023), the present data showed fewer cutting ties and more forgiveness (Table 6). It seems plausible that the difference is due to a specific case: that of a person feeling betrayed and responding by cutting ties and not forgiving, potentially without the betrayer even realizing their actions were perceived as a betrayal. This configuration, conceivable from the betrayed party's perspective, is likely to be absent from the present data, which considers the point of view of the betrayer only.

4.4 | Differences Between Genders, Ages, and Countries

We finally investigated differences related to gender, age, and country. For brevity purposes, the entire statistical output is reported in the Supporting Information.

4.4.1 | Betrayal Category

Men and women did not differ in their likelihood of reporting one type of betrayal or another, $\chi^2(7) = 6.91$, $p = 0.44$, Cox and Snell's $R^2 = 0.006$ (see SM9.1). There was, however, an effect of age, $F(7, 1112) = 6.19$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.038$ (SM9.2). Multiple comparisons with Tukey HSD correction showed that younger respondents were more likely to report cases of cutting ties unexpectedly and revealing secrets, whereas older participants were more likely to report cases of disloyalty and unfaithfulness.

We also investigated differences between the four countries most represented in the sample: France ($n = 160$), Switzerland ($n = 212$), the United Kingdom ($n = 382$), and the USA ($n = 252$). A multinomial log-linear model (controlling for age and gender) revealed only minor differences across countries, $\chi^2(21) = 37.45$, $p = 0.015$. When applying Tukey HSD correction for multiple comparisons, only a small difference between France and the USA reached the threshold for significance (t-ratio = 2.79, $p = 0.038$), suggesting more instances of disappointing expectations in the USA compared to France. All comparisons are reported in SM9.3.[2]

4.4.2 | Type of Relationship

Men and women did not differ in the type of relationship in which the betrayal occurred, $\chi^2(4) = 0.96$, $p = 0.92$, Cox and Snell's $R^2 = 0.001$ (see SM9.4). There was, however, an effect of age, $F(4, 1106) = 30.10$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.098$ (SM9.5). Multiple comparisons showed older participants were more likely to report cases pertaining to a romantic partner or to the workplace, while younger participants were more likely to report cases involving friends, very close friends, and family members.

We finally turned to differences between countries in the type of relationship in which the betrayal occurred (considering, as before, France, Switzerland, the USA and the UK). A multinomial log-linear model (controlling for age and gender) revealed no significant differences across countries, $\chi^2(12) = 17.76$, $p = 0.12$ (SM9.6).

5 | Discussion

There is a paucity of research on betrayal experiences in daily life from the point of view of the betrayer. Drawing from a rich dataset of more than 1000 betrayal stories collected in five countries and three languages, the present paper offers insights into the perspective of the betrayer and contributes to expanding our understanding of why, how, and when betrayal may occur.

Drawing from Lalot (2023), we had devised a nine category typology of betrayal (being disloyal or unfaithful; disappointing one's hopes or expectations; deceiving, lying, or misleading; manipulating or taking advantage; revealing secrets; slandering; cutting ties unexpectedly; failing to offer assistance during times of need; physical or psychological abuse). Our results showed that this typology successfully covered more than 99% of the stories recalled. We notably identified many cases pertaining to the disappointment of one's hopes and expectations, which is consistent with the conceptualization of betrayal as a breach of subjective relational expectations (Fitness 2001; Holmes 1991). The betrayal narratives also pertained to a variety of social relationships: not just romantic partners but also family, friends, and people in the workplace. This work thus reinforces the view that betrayal is multiform and goes far beyond mere romantic infidelity.

Data were collected from five countries: France, Germany, Switzerland, the USA, and the UK. These countries differ in their degree of relational mobility (Thomson et al. 2018) and were thus interesting to compare. The analysis, however, showed no significant differences, except for a small variation in the reporting of cases of disappointing expectations in the USA vs. France. People in societies with higher relational mobility report higher generalized trust as well as greater self-disclosure and intimacy toward friends and romantic partners (Thomson et al. 2018). The present findings suggest that, in spite of these differences in levels, the general understanding of what counts as betrayal is roughly similar in these five countries.

5.1 | From Betrayed to Betrayer's Perspective

In spite of the reversal of perspective from betrayed to betrayer, our results prove globally consistent with the original work of Couch et al. (1999), Jones and Burdette (1994), and Jones et al. (1997, 2001) and the more recent update by Lalot (2023), with which the similar method allows for direct comparison. Overall, the same categories of betrayal and types of relationships emerged, regardless of the protagonist's perspective. This

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suggests that perpetrators and victims alike draw on a shared mental model of what counts as betrayal. Pragmatically, this strengthens the construct validity of our typology, suggesting it is not an artifact of just one role.

Some differences did emerge, however. For example, the most severe cases of betrayal, such as manipulating and abusing, were more frequent in betrayed narratives than in betraying ones. This may point to selective, motivated memory processes, with betrayers being reluctant to admit very serious offenses. In general, however, it is important to note that in raw metrics, percentages for these categories were low regardless of the protagonist's perspective.

Another aspect where the perspectives differ is the event's temporality. In her exploration of narratives from the point of view of the person betrayed, Lalot (2023) noted a relatively uniform distribution of time horizons, with just 13% of people reporting an event from more than 10 years ago. In the present data, this jumps to 32%. A closer inspection reveals that many such cases pertain to the participants' childhood or adolescence. The overrepresentation of narratives from that life period might be a simple consequence of the reminiscence bump (Koppel and Rubin 2016), according to which adults retain the most memories from their late childhood to early adulthood. However, if that were the only explanation, the same pattern should have emerged in Lalot (2023)'s research. Instead, there seems to be another reason that increases the salience of early acts of betraying specifically. Adolescence is a crucial period for the development of one's sense of self (Crone and Dahl 2012), defining who one is but also whom one wants and is expected to be (Markus and Nurius 1986). Although speculative, we would suggest that one's social behavior, including early episodes of betrayal, may therefore be particularly significant as the child realizes they may not always be the loyal, responsible, and trustworthy person they aspire to be (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000). More work, possibly developmental, is needed to better understand how early experiences of betraying and being betrayed shape one's perceptions of others and the self.

5.2 | The Role of Attributions

One could have expected participants to show a self-serving bias (Lau and Russell 1980), justifying their betrayal through external factors. This was not the case: participants predominantly relied on internal factors to explain their betrayal, and rarely blamed the person betrayed or the specificities of the relationship. Interestingly, when participants reported strong internal attributions, the other person was more likely to have forgiven them and less likely to have taken revenge (as indicated by zero-order correlations; see Table 1). This fits the idea that forgiveness increases when the perpetrator recognizes responsibility for the act (Fehr et al. 2010) and conversely that revenge is used as a means of conveying a message and forcing the betrayer to face the consequences of their actions (and would thus be less necessary if responsibility is already recognized; Funk et al. 2014; Gollwitzer and Denzler 2009; Gollwitzer et al. 2011; Jackson et al. 2019). On the other hand, greater rates of other-attribution, or victim blaming, were related to a greater likelihood of the victim taking revenge (Table 1). This finding hints at the risk of perpetuating a cycle of retaliation and aggression in dysfunctional relationships (Schumann and Ross 2010).

Compared with the results of Lalot (2023), the present pattern of attributions was broadly similar. However, descriptively at least, both protagonists tend to blame themselves more than the other did (i.e., higher blame put on the perpetrator by the perpetrator than by the person betrayed, and vice versa). This result is surprising. Not only does it go against a self-serving bias as previously mentioned, it does not entirely fit with earlier findings from similar narrative procedures (albeit on slightly different topics). For example, in their study of anger narratives from both perspectives, Baumeister et al. (1990) noted that perpetrators were more likely to invoke external or mitigating circumstances, justifications, to deny negative consequences, or to (partly) blame the victim. Victims, on the other hand, were more likely to describe the perpetrator's actions as incomprehensible, immoral, and deliberately hurtful or malicious.

At the same time, the authors found perpetrators were also more likely to self-blame and to regret the incident (Baumeister et al. 1990). With this in mind, it is important to note that the general acknowledgement of one's responsibility does not necessarily imply high intentionality. As highlighted by different scholars, betrayals can largely be incidental or even accidental (Chan 2009; Jones and Davis 1965; Morrison and Robinson 1997): even if the betrayer was mechanically responsible for the act, they did not necessarily intend to hurt the other person in the process. From a misalignment of expectations to the unfolding of unexpected consequences, from cowardice to moral conundrums, from egoistical motives to a desire to take revenge: intentionality can certainly vary. More work is needed to clarify the different possible degrees of intentionality, beyond a mere accidental/intentional dichotomy.

5.3 | Limitations and Future Directions

This work followed the betrayal narratives procedure, which provides insight into the stories that are more salient in people's minds, and therefore probably more relevant to their self-narrative (see Couch et al. 1999; Jones and Burdette 1994; Jones et al. 1997, 2001; Lalot 2023). This, however, does not allow us to conclude about the general prevalence of different types of betrayal. The betrayal narratives procedure, as any free-recall method, also entails a risk of reporting bias, especially when asking participants to recall socially undesirable actions such as betrayals. In the present study, only a few participants refused to recall a betrayal action, or declared they had "never betrayed anyone." Many, on the other hand, seemed to welcome the opportunity to "get it off their chest" and share their story, anonymously. Nonetheless, we would be cautious before concluding about betrayal occurrences in everyday life from the present data. Future studies relying on different procedures, for example, the experience sampling method (ESM), would be useful in this regard. Even more specifically, it could be argued that the instructions provided as part of the procedure (naming some specific types of relationships) might have influenced our participants' answers, steering them toward close relationships only. Using more open instructions in the future may spur the recall of

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other narratives, related, for example, to strangers (Lalot 2026), political figures (Schuck et al. 2026), and so on.

Although our cross-country comparison revealed almost no differences, we must acknowledge that these countries, although varying on indices such as relational mobility, are all Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and developed. It will be important for future studies to turn to less-often studied places to strengthen our understanding of how betrayal is conceptualized in different cultures.

For each story, we only had access to the point of view of the perpetrator, with no means to verify its objectivity. As previously mentioned, betrayals are inherently subjective experiences as they pertain to perceived violations of expectations and trust (Fitness 2001; Holmes 1991). However, gathering the combined perspectives of the perpetrator and the person who was betrayed could be invaluable to better understand how points of view might vary, attributions might differ, and so on. In clinical psychology, such work exists with case studies describing instances of infidelity in couples, which allow in-depth analysis of specific betrayal cases (for a review, see Giacobbi and Lalot 2025). Future studies may want to expand the scope of this approach to also consider betrayals between friends, in the workplace, and so on, beyond couples therapy.

Finally, we chose to build our investigation of why the betrayal occurred on the causal attribution framework. This was justified given the key role of attribution for trust, trust breach, and trust repairs dynamics (see Chan 2009; Tomlinson and Mayer 2009). However, as highlighted above, (internal) responsibility does not equate to intentionality. Future research may want to investigate this question further, one option being to directly ask perpetrators *why* they acted the way they did and why events unfolded the way they did.

In sum, the present results contribute to validating the proposed typology of betrayal in interpersonal relationships by taking into account the perspective of the betrayer. These results highlight a variety of types of betrayal and of relationships in which these occur. They also illustrate the different developments of such incidents, ranging from forgiving to cutting ties or taking revenge. These results thus open the way for further fruitful research, continuing to explore why, how, and when we do such things to each other.

Author Contributions

F.L.: conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft, visualization, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition. **A.M.B.:** formal analysis, data curation, writing – review and editing. **J.S.:** formal analysis, data curation, writing – review and editing. **L.M.:** validation, data curation, writing – review and editing. **A.B.:** investigation, data curation, writing – review and editing.

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Ethics Statement

The investigation was approved by the ethics committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Kent (#202417138751349176) and by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Basel (#002-23-1). Participant consent was obtained in written form at the beginning of the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data, materials, and code for analysis are publicly available on the OSF: https://osf.io/5bpz4.

Endnotes

[1] As noted in the preregistration, the questionnaire also included items about long-term consequences of the betrayal (i.e., present closeness to the other person, and present emotions when thinking about the betrayal). These are treated in detail elsewhere and will not be detailed here.

[2] We also tested for differences between students and non-students. The analysis focused on the two countries from which we had both student and non-student samples, that is, Switzerland and the UK ($n = 594$). When controlling for age and gender, the analysis showed no differences in betrayal category between students and non-students, $\chi^2(7) = 8.24$, $p = 0.31$.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data SM1:** Demographics of each sample. **SM2**. Classification of betraying narratives by sample. **SM3**. Relationship to the person who was betrayed by sample. **SM4**. Crosstable: betrayal narratives categorisation and relationship to the person who betrayed. **SM5**. Time since event, by sample. **SM6**. Relationship with the person who was betrayed: interpersonal closeness and relationship length. **SM7**. Causal attributions made by the betrayer for different categories of betrayal. **SM8**. Behavioural responses to different categories of betrayal. **SM9**. Differences between genders, ages, and countries.

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