Psychological Response Data on the Traumatic Nature of 600 Written Events

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ABSTRACT

We present a dataset containing participants' ratings (n = 250) of 600 written descriptions of events ranging from benign ('witnessed a leaf falling from a tree') to potentially distressing and/or injurious ('was stabbed by a close friend'). Participants were randomly assigned to rate a subset of events on a 7-point Likert scale from "Not at all traumatic" to "Extremely traumatic". Participants were also assessed in terms of demographic characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity, previous trauma exposure, psychiatric diagnosis, religiosity, political orientation, age). The data are suitable for various purposes, including as stimuli for experimental paradigms or for descriptive analysis.

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(1) OVERVIEW
CONTEXT

Collection Date(s)
October 1, 2018–October 3, 2018

BACKGROUND

We present a dataset of 250 participants' ratings of 600 written descriptions of events on a scale ranging from "Not at all traumatic" to "Extremely traumatic." The definition of what constitutes a trauma has increasingly become a topic of scientific study over the past few decades, as the range of events that may precipitate a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may be expanding.

Once limited to survivors of warfare and sexual abuse and other canonical extreme stressors, the PTSD label now applies to a much broader conceptualization of traumatic events [1]. For example, a recent survey of 769 students at Arizona State University revealed that 25% met criteria for "clinically significant" levels of distress on par with diagnosable PTSD in response to the 2016 election [2]. Other examples of the "conceptual bracket creep in the definition of trauma" (p. 231) [3] include exposure to crude jokes [4], giving birth to a healthy baby [5], and viewing televised coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks [6]. This expanded view of PTSD raises questions about what types of events might be traumatic for whom, in which settings, and why.

The aim of collecting these data was to establish a stimulus set of a wide range of potentially traumatic events which could be used in further experimental research. Thus, we collected objective ratings of potential stimuli as well as demographic characteristics of the raters.

(2) METHODS
SAMPLE

The sample consists of 250 English-speaking US participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk from October 1, 2018 to October 3, 2018. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 70, with a mean age of 36 (SD = 10). Most participants identified as female (n = 138), with the remainder identifying as male (n = 108) or other (n = 4). A majority of raters self-identified their race as White/Caucasian (n = 193) and non-Hispanic (n = 221). Most participants reported no history of serious trauma (n = 173) or lifetime psychiatric diagnosis (n = 218).

MATERIALS

The largest portion of the dataset concerns participants' ratings of the events. Events were formulated by the research team via brainstorming exercises. Guided by the team's expertise in trauma research, events were intended to cover a wide range of experiences with diverse potential emotional reactions and to provide a sufficient sample size for use in experimental research. Participants rated the events on a Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all traumatic") to 7 ("Extremely traumatic").

Participants were also assessed in terms of demographic characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity, previous trauma exposure, psychiatric diagnosis, religiosity, political orientation, age).

PROCEDURES

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six possible stimulus sets in Qualtrics. Each stimulus set contained 98 unique items and 12 constant items that were used for reliability verifications across the six sets. Providing a visual example, *Figure 1* shows a thresholded correlation network ($r \geq 0.3$) of the 98 unique items in the first set with items ordered and colored according to their mean rating. After rating all items, participants completed demographic items and a human participant and English language verifier.

QUALITY CONTROL

Participants were required to complete a reCAPTCHA prior to taking the survey to ensure that they were human and not automated responders. Three attention checks ("If you're actually reading this question, please select the number five as your response") were interspersed in the item ratings. Participants were removed from the dataset if they did not complete all three attention checks correctly. Following the survey, participants were asked to complete a human participant and English verifier ("In the space provided below, please describe your activities last weekend in exactly 3 sentences"). Participants were removed from the dataset if their response did not address the prompt, contained less than two ideas, contained less than three ideas and at least one English error, or contained more than three English errors. Of 300 participants who completed the study, 50 were excluded. An additional 25 individuals accessed the Qualtrics survey but did not complete it. Interrater reliability across the batches assessed with the set of 12 constant items was good when considering each of 250 participants as separate judges ($ICC_1 = 0.70$), and excellent when considering the average value across each of the six sets ($ICC_1 = 0.99$).

ETHICAL ISSUES

All identifying information has been removed from the dataset. Participants indicated their consent prior to the survey. The study was approved by the Harvard Institutional Review Board.

(3) DATASET DESCRIPTION
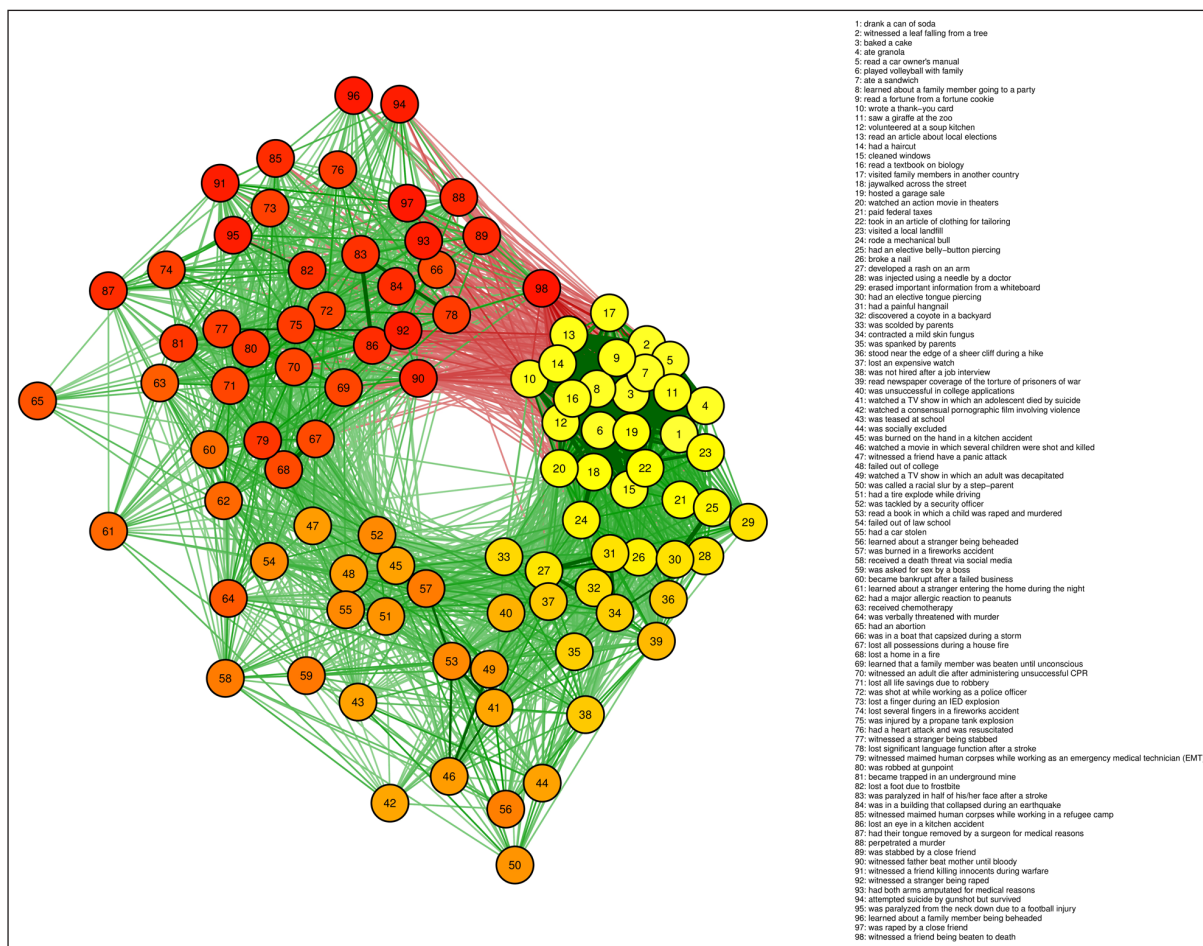## OBJECT NAME

Trauma_Stimuli_Ratings.csv

1: drank a can of soda
2: witnessed a leaf falling from a tree
3: baked a cake
4: ate granola
5: read a car owner's manual
6: played volleyball with family
7: ate a sandwich
8: learned about a family member going to a party
9: read a fortune from a fortune cookie
10: wrote a thank–you card
11: saw a giraffe at the zoo
12: volunteered at a soup kitchen
13: read an article about local elections
14: had a haircut
15: cleaned windows
16: read a textbook on biology
17: visited family members in another country
18: jaywalked across the street
19: hosted a garage sale
20: watched an action movie in theaters
21: paid federal taxes
22: took in an article of clothing for tailoring
23: visited a local landfill
24: rode a mechanical bull
25: had an elective belly–button piercing
26: broke a nail
27: developed a rash on an arm
28: was injected using a needle by a doctor
29: erased important information from a whiteboard
30: had an elective tongue piercing
31: had a painful hangnail
32: discovered a coyote in a backyard
33: was scolded by parents
34: contracted a mild skin fungus
35: was spanked by parents
36: stood near the edge of a sheer cliff during a hike
37: lost an expensive watch
38: was not hired after a job interview
39: read newspaper coverage of the torture of prisoners of war
40: was unsuccessful in college applications
41: watched a TV show in which an adolescent died by suicide
42: watched a consensual pornographic film involving violence
43: was teased at school
44: was socially excluded
45: was burned on the hand in a kitchen accident
46: watched a movie in which several children were shot and killed
47: witnessed a friend have a panic attack
48: failed out of college
49: watched a TV show in which an adult was decapitated
50: was called a racial slur by a step–parent
51: had a tire explode while driving
52: was tackled by a security officer
53: read a book in which a child was raped and murdered
54: failed out of law school
55: had a car stolen
56: learned about a stranger being beheaded
57: was burned in a fireworks accident
58: received a death threat via social media
59: was asked for sex by a boss
60: became bankrupt after a failed business
61: learned about a stranger entering the home during the night
62: had a major allergic reaction to peanuts
63: received chemotherapy
64: was verbally threatened with murder
65: had an abortion
66: was in a boat that capsized during a storm
67: lost all possessions during a house fire
68: lost a home in a fire
69: learned that a family member was beaten until unconscious
70: witnessed an adult die after administering unsuccessful CPR
71: lost all life savings due to robbery
72: was shot at while working as a police officer
73: lost a finger during an IED explosion
74: lost several fingers in a fireworks accident
75: was injured by a propane tank explosion
76: had a heart attack and was resuscitated
77: witnessed a stranger being stabbed
78: lost significant language function after a stroke
79: witnessed maimed human corpses while working as an emergency medical technician (EMT)
80: was robbed at gunpoint
81: became trapped in an underground mine
82: lost a foot due to frostbite
83: was paralyzed in half of his/her face after a stroke
84: was in a building that collapsed during an earthquake
85: witnessed maimed human corpses while working in a refugee camp
86: lost an eye in a kitchen accident
87: had their tongue removed by a surgeon for medical reasons
88: perpetrated a murder
89: was stabbed by a close friend
90: witnessed father beat mother until bloody
91: witnessed a friend killing innocents during warfare
92: witnessed a stranger being raped
93: had both arms amputated for medical reasons
94: attempted suicide by gunshot but survived
95: was paralyzed from the neck down due to a football injury
96: learned about a family member being beheaded
97: was raped by a close friend
98: witnessed a friend being beaten to death

Figure 1.

DATA TYPE
Primary data

FORMAT NAMES AND VERSIONS
CSV

DATA COLLECTORS
NA

LANGUAGE
English

LICENSE
The data have been deposited under a CC-By Attribution 4.0 International (CC-By) License.

EMBARGO
No embargo

REPOSITORY LOCATION
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/93AX7*
https://osf.io/93ax7/

PUBLICATION DATE
20/11/2018

(4) REUSE POTENTIAL

This dataset contains ratings from 250 participants on 600 potentially traumatic events. These data are suitable for a wide variety of purposes. First and foremost, the data represent validated stimuli that could be used in a wide variety of experimental settings. For example, researchers could provide an experimental manipulation and measure response via ratings of the stimuli, or researchers could display the stimuli as a manipulation while participants are measured via EEG or fMRI equipment. This is the original purpose for which we collected this data [7].

In addition to being used as stimuli, the data could also be analysed to study participants' conceptualization of trauma. Researchers could examine whether ratings differ across different demographic groups or prior experiences with trauma and mental health. Researchers could use text analysis or qualitative coding to separate the items into different types of trauma (e.g., "violence", "sexual abuse", "natural disaster") or different types of exposure (e.g., "experienced directly", "witnessed", "learned about") and examine whether differences emerge between ratings on these categories [8].

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

FUNDING INFORMATIONS

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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