The Concept of *betrayal* in the consciousness of the English: A psycholinguistic study

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Abstract. The study attempts to reveal verbal, that is, lexically materialised associative responses of English respondents to the word stimulus' betrayal'. As the word association test is considered a reliable way of studying the content of the national mental image of a specific concept, the method allowed to receive a collective linguistic representation of the researched concept reflected in the consciousness of the tested participants. The association test was held with undergraduate and postgraduate students, respondents with bachelor's and master's degrees who were native speakers of English and residents of London (UK), aged 18 to 25 (365 males, 411 females). The test results show that the English associate the concept of *betrayal* with a traitor. They clearly identify the subjects of betrayal – specific persons (historical, public, political figures, heroes of cartoons and literary works) with whom the objects of betrayal were in a close, trusting relationship. The characteristic features of traitors are treachery, lack of empathy, and the desire to hurt deliberately. The motivations behind such persons' behavioural scenarios are deception, fraud, and searching for personal gain. In the consciousness of English speakers, such behaviour is verbalised as a shameful act, a crime that must be punished. Betrayal causes negative emotions and is characterised as harmful, destructive, and disgusting.

Keywords: word association test, consciousness, concept, verbalisation, betrayal, the English.

Іванченко Марія, Колегаєва Ірина. Концепт «зрада» у свідомості англійців: психолінгвістичне дослідження.

Анотація. У дослідженні зроблено спробу виявити вербальні, тобто лексично матеріалізовані асоціативні реакції респондентів-англійців на слово-стимул «зрада». Оскільки асоціативний експеримент уважають надійним способом вивчення змісту національної ментальної картини світу певного концепту, метод дав змогу отримати колективну мовну репрезентацію досліджуваного концепту, відображену у свідомості учасників експерименту. В асоціативному експерименті взяли участь студенти та

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аспіранти, респонденти зі ступенями бакалавра та магістра, які є носіями англійської мови та проживають у Лондоні (Великобританія), віком від 18 до 25 років (365 осіб чоловічої статі, 411 осіб жіночої статі). Результати тесту засвідчили, що англійці асоціюють поняття "betrayal" зі зрадником. Вони чітко ідентифікують суб'єктів зради – конкретних осіб (історичні, громадські, політичні діячі, герої мультфільмів та літературних творів), з якими об'єкти зради перебували у близьких, довірливих стосунках. Характерними рисами зрадників є підступність, відсутність емпатії та бажання навмисно завдати болю. Мотивами поведінкових сценаріїв таких осіб є обман, шахрайство та пошук особистої вигоди. У свідомості англомовних людей така поведінка вербалізується як ганебний вчинок, злочин, який має бути покараний. Зрада викликає негативні емоції та характеризується як шкідлива, деструктивна й огидна.

Ключові слова: *асоціативний експеримент, свідомість, англійці, концепт, вербалізація, зрада, англійці.*

Introduction

In recent decades, the person has become the criterion for setting goals and choosing research methods in linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and other sciences. Shifting the scientific focus involves terms and concepts borrowed from traditional human sciences but also methods of scientific research. Within the framework of the anthropocentric paradigm in modern linguistic science, one of the leading places is occupied by the association test, in which the units of analysis are associations.

Associations are the focus of linguistic science attention because they are determined by the very nature of the linguistic sign, the meaning of which is not fixed but depends on certain subjective and objective factors and is not identical to how it is presented in dictionaries (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016). The connection between the concept and its symbolic expression occurs mainly through the word. Moreover, the word is connected with the concept (denoted) through several associations. Under such conditions, the analysis of associations gives the researcher information not only about the principles of the environment actualisation by language units but also about the worldview of the particular language community, mentality, motives of behaviour, evaluations, stereotypes and culture of its representatives.

There is nothing in social life that is not in individual minds, but almost everything they have is taken from society (Durkheim, 1998, p. 359). Considering this, the association test data can reveal the mechanism of concept verbalisation (Ryspayeva et al., 2024). It allows simulation of the "associative profile" of consciousness images specific to this culture and language, which integrates mental and sensory knowledge possessed by a particular ethnic group.

Concepts represent cultural values and are key components of national culture. They reflect cultural realities, the specifics of a particular nation's worldview, and life philosophy's most important categories and attitudes (Evans, 2009). Concepts are dynamic units of an individual's cognitive and communicative activity that function spontaneously and are subject to the laws of a person's mental life.

The association test is considered one of the most effective techniques of concept study; it allows one to identify the most significant cognitive features of the concept relevant to the current state of consciousness (Martinek, 2011, p. 29). In this respect, this study explores the conceptualisation of betrayal by the modern English youth in their cultural value system from the psycholinguistic perspective. Interpreting the association test results makes it possible to outline the concept structure's components and establish the concept's value for representatives of a particular language community.

Method

Testing is considered one of the leading methods of most scientific research. In linguistics, this method of researching various language issues enables the description of linguistic phenomena features in managed and controlled conditions arranged in advance.

The association test occupies a special place among other ways of reconstructing concepts in consciousness, primarily since it allows to reveal of the mental lexicon of the language community, its verbal memory and cultural stereotypes. Language research should include more than just the analysis of multi-genre discourses. It must be supplemented with the analysis of associations – forms of language memory reflection. Native speaker, being a participant in the test, acts not only as an informant who reports on their knowledge of the language but also as a respondent with their system of values and motives (Kuzembayeva, 2023). It allows us to "penetrate" the deep conceptual structures of consciousness based on archetypes, myths and symbols (Mizin, 2008, p. 71).

An association test involving the first response to the stimulus word determined the conceptualisation of betrayal in the consciousness of the English. This test ensures "full-fledged purity" of responses to the directly offered stimulus word and maximum reliability of the obtained results. The results' validity is directly proportional to the number of informants, which ensures the separation of frequent associations from single-individual ones and thus "reduces subjective psycholinguistic indicators" (Mizin, 2016, p. 36).

Participants

Considering the above, residents of London (England) aged 18 to 25 (365 males, 411 females) and native speakers of English with different educations were involved in testing: college and university students, respondents with bachelor's and master's degrees. The association test was held at Kingston University within the Erasmus+ program (Grant Agreement No. 2020-1-UK01-KA107-078410).

Each participant received a questionnaire letter with an accompanying explanation and brief instructions for filling it out. The questions were formulated clearly and comprehensibly for respondents of different social statuses, ages, education, and genders.

The introductory part of the questionnaire briefly explained the course and purpose of testing. After that, the participants indicated information about their age, education and gender. The main part contained questions about the association with the stimulus word, which nominates the researched concept. The test participants had no restrictions regarding interpretations, so both one-word responses and detailed answers were obtained.

The results of the test were grouped according to the thematic principle. Ten semantic blocks of associations were pointed out. The next step was to analyse data using a quantitative indicator, which allowed simulation of the association field. The nucleus and the periphery were distinguished within the structure of the association field. The nucleus includes the most frequent responses to the stimulus word. Associations within the nuclear association field are also called "associative norm", "culturally specific", "standard", or "stereotypical", that is, those that give an idea of collective knowledge. There is a core zone within the structure of the association field. Associations with lower quantitative indicators form this part compared to the components of the nuclear zone of the field, but they are pretty significant. The periphery includes responses with a frequency coefficient below the average, including single responses. The periphery of the field is divided into close and far.

Results and Discussion

The association test revealed 776 responses to the stimulus word *"betrayal."* After processing the received data, ten thematic groups of associations that reveal the content of the concept BETRAYAL were pointed out (the number of responses to the stimulus word *"betrayal"* is indicated in brackets).

Associations related to the "performer" (192 responses).

The overwhelming majority of responses to the stimulus word *betrayal* among the respondents are expressed by the word *friend* (15 responses) and its combination with the adjectives *close, old, and ex* (28 examples).

In the consciousness of the English, traitors are friends or simply human beings (*person, men, people*) with whom the object of betrayal socially interacts (*partner (9), romantic partner (5), spouse (5), fathers (2), my dad (4), my girlfriend (2)*). On the other hand, it is an adversary (*enemy (3)*), a dishonest person (*fake (1)*), a scoundrel (*snake (1)*), a criminal (*criminal (4), outlaw (2), pirates (1)*), a spy rooted in foreign intelligence (*spy (8), mole (10), illegal (4)*).

Words-responses, expressed by adjectives, mark the respondents' attitude to the subjects of betrayal. Relations with these persons are based on trust (*close, personal*), but the personal characteristics are opposite: *disloyal (2) and selfish (2).*

So, within this group of responses, the opposition "friend : : enemy" is clearly outlined. So, on the one hand, a betrayer is a close, trusted person: *friend (n), partner (n), close (adj), personal (adj).* On the other hand, a person who poses a threat: *traitor (n), enemy (n), spy (n), mole (n), criminal (n), pirate (n), fake (n), snake (n), selfish (adj), disloyal (adj).*

Some of the responses refer to specific persons:

- the biblical character: *Jude* (4);

- cartoon characters: *Sasuke Uchiha* (2) is a character from the manga and anime series "Naruto";

- historical figures who acted against their state: *Benedict Arnold (10), Guy Fawkes (4), William Wallace (1), Edward Snowden (4), Anne Boleyn (1);*

- political figures involved in scandals related to the presidential elections: *Richard Nixon (3)* was the 37th president of the United States of America (1969-1974) from the Republican Party—the only president in this country's history who resigned early. The reason for the compilation of powers was the Watergate scandal; *Donald Trump (4)*—after losing the presidential election for a second term in 2020, tried to deny the election results.

- public figures who had extramarital affairs: *Adam Levine (5)* – American singer, actor, vocalist and guitarist of the band Maroon 5; *Ned Fulmer (5)* – American comedian; John *Mulaney (2)* – an American stand-up comedian, actor, writer and producer; *Prince Charles (4), Bill Clinton (4)* – cheated on their wives.

- political figures participating in a conspiracy against state figures: *Marcus Junius Brutus (1)* is one of the most famous political figures of ancient Rome in the 1st century BC. After Gaius' victory, Julius Caesar supported him and later enjoyed significant privileges from him. He was one of the organisers

and executors of the conspiracy against Julius Caesar in 44 BC. According to evidence, it was M. Brutus who dealt the fatal blow to J. Caesar (Freeman, 2008).

Responses that reflect social institutions that are objects of betrayal (154 responses).

Betrayal is an element of relations between people in a community, state, and society. The responses *'country' (6) and 'state' (4)* were obtained in the conducted association test. Respondents also associate betrayal with the political system *monarchy (royalty) (6)*, state bodies *government (10), and authority (3)*.

To this group belong lexeme *allegiance (2),* the phrase *"going against your country" (2).* Treacherous behaviour of the state leadership towards its subordinates is associated with Marie Antoinette's phrase, *"let them eat cake" (2).* According to historical data, the queen responded to the news that the peasants in her kingdom were starving because they had no bread. Over time, this phrase symbolised the royal government's complete disregard for the people's problems.

Respondents' answers also mention groups of people united by common views, activities, and interests: *community (3), group (1), movement (you belong to) (2), and leaders (2).*

The stimulus word *betrayal* is associated among English youth with social relations that are formed and function successfully based on mutual sympathy and common interests (Eve, 2002, p. 390). Respondents mentioned *affair (28), marriage (14), relationship (15), friendship (9), couple (8), family (5), lovers (4), family related (8),* i.e. such types of social bonds, which are based on openness, sincerity, trust and support (Vela-McConnell, 2017, p. 231).

Accordingly, *betrayal* is destructive for the mentioned forms of social interaction since it does not meet the expectations of trusting relationships. Representatives of the language community compare the negative consequences with the *family crisis (7), the end of friendship (10)* and *undermining the place of living (family, friends) (1).*

Associations by contiguity refer to events caused by betrayal (85).

For the Englishmen, betrayal is primarily associated with such semantic characteristics as treachery and surprise, which are associated, on the one hand, with the limitation of visual contact. Residents compare these features with the back, a part of the body that a person cannot visualise without outside help, or a part of space that is out of sight (*from the blind side, in the back*). The Englishmen associate the impossibility of visual contact with such semantic characteristics of betrayal as treachery and surprise.

On the other hand, betrayal is a physical interaction of bodies applying force – a blow, usually with a weapon. Thus, 17 responses are phrases that include the verb *to stab*, which, according to the etymological dictionary, came into usage at the end of the 14th century with the meaning *"thrust with a pointed weapon"* (ED). These are associations based on a comparison of betrayal with a deep wound (in the back): *backstabbing (12), being stabbed in the back (5), to being blindsided (1)*.

Participants of the test associate *betrayal* with events involving the use of weapons and violence, verbalised by the words *war (war crimes, civil war) (12) and fight (5)*. Associations of *betrayal* with firearms also refer to military actions – *gunpowder (1), firework (2),* verb *fire (4),* and adjective *military (2)*. A subgroup of words-responses is singled out, denoting events that involve changes in the existing order's development and course of events: *revolt (4) and political upheaval (10)*.

One response, *January 6 (1),* refers to the events of 2021, when supporters of Donald Trump, after his defeat in the next presidential election, organised a protest and attacked the US Capitol building in Washington. Protesters did not recognise the election results and demanded to leave Donald Trump as president.

The English perceive betrayal as a phenomenon that destroys internal unity and wholeness. Such associations as *divorce (3), break up (6),* and *break boundary (2)* refer to the concept of wholeness, which, summarising the various dimensions of human existence, emphasises the phenomenon of everyday life as the original aspect of human existence (Opeida, 2015, p. 240), which enables life itself. Accordingly, the "violation of wholeness" is the result of a destructive process that leads to the destabilisation of human existence.

Associations related to the idea of betrayal as an irrelevant result of the trust process (76).
Numerous responses relate to the perception of betrayal as an irrelevant result of the trust process (76 responses). "Trust" is a key concept according to the social exchange theory (Khyzhniak, 2017, p. 13). It is the main condition of social interaction, its guarantor, and its formation follows the principle of "expectation-justification."

Thus, 53 phrases and word combinations contain in their structure noun *trust,* that is, "firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something (OLD)" and its derivatives *to trust – trusted – trustworthy*. For example: *break of trust (18), loss of trust (10), losing trust (5), against values (3), loss of trust (4)*. Part of the word combinations is formed with the help of

lexical units that are synonyms of the mentioned noun – *faith, value, support (against values (3), undermined faith (2), does not support (1))*. The inconsistency of the obtained result with the desired one is expressed by combining the key concepts with the lexemes *break, breach, loss, losing, lost, against, take away, behind*, which are united by the common seme "to deprive". The core feature of these responses is seme "one who cannot be trusted".

Associations by contiguity that explain emotions caused by betrayal (75).
One of the oldest mental functions of a man is the emotional reaction to external and internal stimuli. In this way, a person reveals their attitude to the phenomenon of the surrounding reality and estimates it.

Responses associating emotions with a physical feeling: *pain (6), hurt (18), hurtful (4),* and *heartbreak (2)* give a particular expressiveness to *betrayal*, which explains the prevailing majority of responses *hurt feelings (18), worst feeling (1)* among other language expressions of emotions. Failure to meet expectations in a large number of respondents is associated with disappointment, accompanied by such destructive feelings as *regret (2), hatred (5), anger (8),* and *abhorrence (1)*. The consequences of betrayal in a relationship are *depression (2)* and mental pain, which in English is expressed by the lexeme *sadness (15)*.

Adjacency responses reflecting behavioural scenarios (61).
The semantics of irrelevance is also supported by associations related to behavior scenarios classified as deviant. From the sociological point of view, such behaviour generates social contradictions and is characterised as a deviation from generally accepted norms and rules of behaviour (Ulmer, 2000). For the English, *betrayal* is associated with such deviant behavioural scenarios as *cheating (45), deceiving (2), violation (2), wrongdoing (2), lying (9),* and *leaving (1)*.

Associations by contiguity, referring to punishment (45).
Condemnation of *betrayal* by representatives of the English-speaking society is evidenced by numerous associations that refer to the means of influencing someone who has committed a crime – punishment. The participants of the experiment revealed such verbal responses as "deprivation of freedom" – *jail (25), prison (5),* verb *to commit (put into prison) (1);* "punishment, execution" – *guillotine (3), execution (2), punishment (by death) (5), revenge (4);* "injustice" – *false accusation (2), injustice (2)*.

Associations related to the idea of betrayal as a crime (41).
Among the associations obtained as a result of the experiment, the group "betrayal – crime" clearly stands out, that is, "violation of the type of interaction of the individual with the social environment, which is stable for this system" (Ulmer, 2000, p. 27). The most significant number of responses are words that contain seme "false" in their structure: the nouns *crime (18), corruption (1), violence (2),* the adjective *unlawful (2), and criminal (1).* This group includes the association *scandal (2),* which is defined in the Oxford dictionary as "an action or event regarded as morally or legally wrong and causing general public outrage" (OLD).

The shame of *betrayal* among English youth is associated with behaviour that contradicts society's requirements. Seven responses obtained in the experiment are phrases formed with the preposition *against* and nouns *law, rule, and option: against the law (3), not always right (2), going against a set of rules (2), and against the option (2).*

Axiological associations (41).
Identifying the evaluative component in the semantic structure of the stimulus word *betrayal* involves a group of axiological associations. The vast majority of the received responses, 15 – adjective *unfaithful*.

The rest of the responses are lexical means by which the respondents convey a negative attitude towards the phenomenon of betrayal. Almost equally (2–5 responses), betrayal is characterised as an *ultimate (2), unpure (5)* phenomenon that causes disgust (*disgusted (2), bad (4)*), which is devoid of integrity – *detached (1),* and compared with *darkness (2).*

Associations by contiguity (9).
The group of associations by contiguity is the least numerous (9). According to the theory of memory, this type of association reflects the connection between objects and phenomena simultaneously in the space-time continuum in the human psyche. These are *love (3), love problem (1), oath (2), jealousy (1), exes (1), and guilt (1).*

The obtained data were ranked by quantitative indicators and presented as an association field. To simulate the association field of the stimulus word *betrayal*, the entire array of the obtained results was processed according to the principle of frequency. The nuclear of this field, which the most frequent associations form, was outlined.

Figure 1
Association Field of the Concept Betrayal in the Consciousness of the English
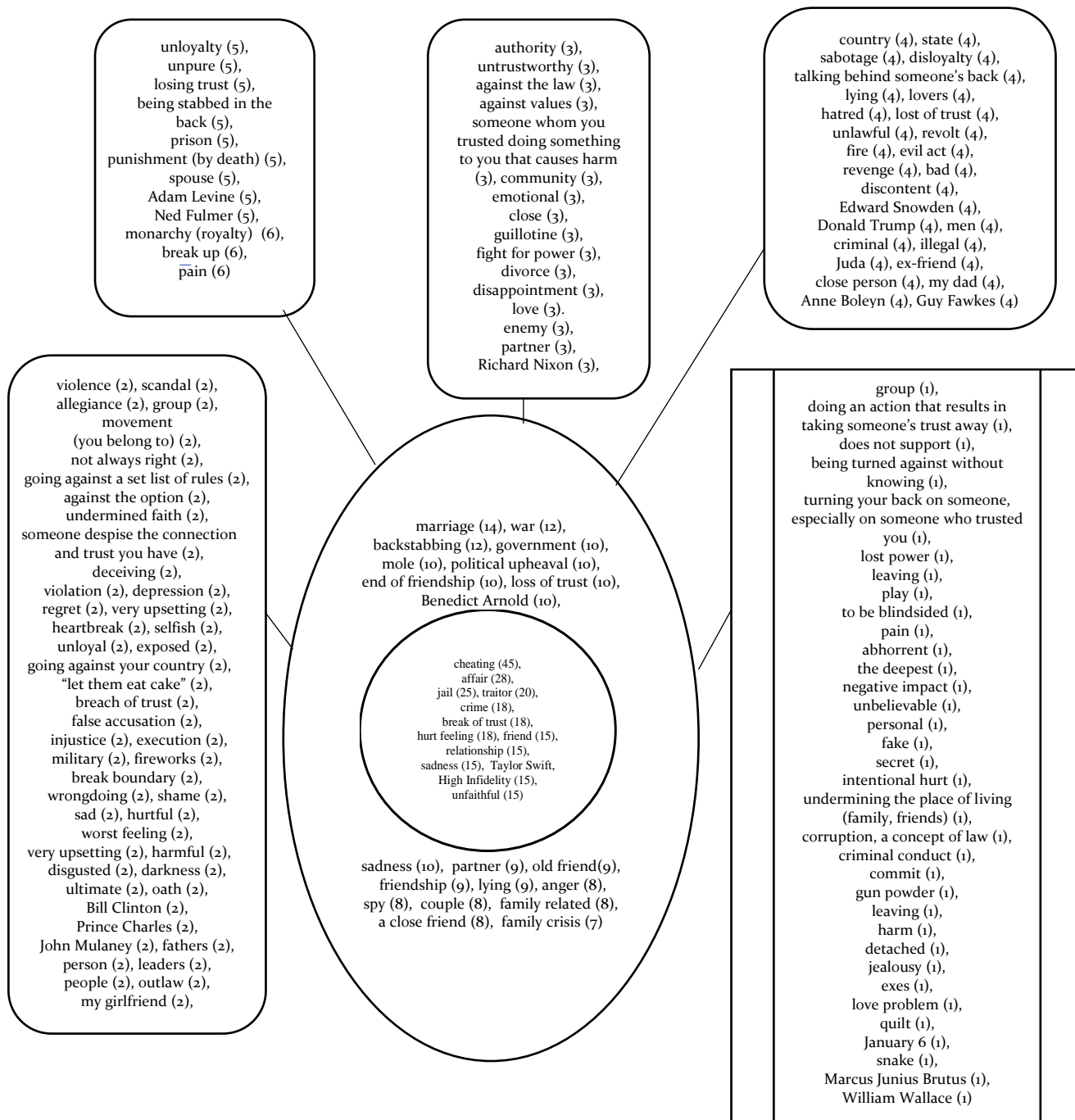
The core zone or basic layer in the structure of the outlined field is formed by the associations, the quantitative indicator – 14 – 7 responses (31 examples). Verbalised responses are presented on the periphery of the association field. The total number is 149.

These are associations with the quantitative indicators from 6 to 1 responses. The periphery of the association field of the concept *of betrayal* is, in turn, divided into close and far. The close periphery includes associations

indicated by 6 to 2 respondents (111 responses). The far periphery is formed by single or individual responses – 38 associations in total. Figure 1 represents the simulation of the association field of *betrayal* in the consciousness of the English participants.

Conclusions

The association test results proved that the concept of *betrayal* was actively presented in the consciousness of the English respondents. The obtained results were sorted into ten thematic groups of associations. After statistical data processing, the association field of the concept *of betrayal* was simulated. The nuclear of the field, according to quantitative indicators, includes responses which verbalise *betrayal* as a crime – *cheating (45), jail (25), crime (18);* a phenomenon related to interpersonal relationships – *affair (28), friend (15), relationship (15);* violates trust – *traitor (20), break of trust (18), unfaithful (15);* causes negative emotions – *hurt feeling (18), sadness (15).*

The core zone or basic layer in the structure of the outlined field is formed by the associations, with the quantitative indicators 14 – 7 responses: which concern responders' personal life – *marriage (14), end of friendship (10), sadness (10), partner (9), old friend (9), couple (8), family related (8), close friend (8), family crisis (7);* socially important phenomena – *war (war crimes, civil war) (12), government (10), mole (10), Benedict Arnold (10), political upheaval (10).*

The periphery of the association field includes responses revealing the connection of *betrayal* with humiliation, devaluation, desire to hurt, immoral behaviour, and the names of perpetrators. The unacceptability of such actions and deeds is expressed as the need to apply punishment–imprisonment or the death penalty. Many associations identify the evaluative component in the semantic structure of the concept *of betrayal* and characterise this phenomenon as harmful, destructive, unfaithful, and disgusting.

Disclosure Statement

The authors reported no potential conflict of interests.

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