Borderline personality disorder traits and sexual compliance: A fear of abandonment manipulation

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A B S T R A C T
Borderline personality disorder (BPD) traits are primarily characterized by frantic efforts to avoid abandonment and unstable interpersonal relationships. Sexual coercion and consequently sexual compliance are overrepresented in the romantic relationships of those with BPD traits. The present study examined whether this association is altered after inducing fear of abandonment with a novel false feedback manipulation. After receiving an accurate personality assessment, 130 undergraduate women were randomly told how well they match with their current romantic partner—either in the 11th percentile or the 89th. Our manipulation decreased mood and relationship expectations in the poorly matched condition; these effects were positive in the highly matched condition. We found that this fear of abandonment manipulation moderated the association between BPD traits and hypothetical sexual compliance. In the poorly matched condition, participants predicted that they would be more likely to engage in unwanted sexual activity the more BPD traits they endorsed (β = 0.498, p < 0.001, ηp² = 0.257); this association was not present in the highly matched condition (β = 0.209, p = 0.102, ηp² = 0.045). Knowing that the relationship between BPD traits and sexual compliance may be situational increases our understanding of the relationships of people with BPD traits.

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1. Introduction

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is characterized by an instability that pervades multiple contexts (e.g., tumultuous interpersonal relationships, distorted self-image, intense and unstable affect, and marked impulsivity; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). While nine BPD traits exist, the most important diagnostic criterion according to the DSM-5—frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment (APA, 2013)—highlights a situational factor that might make this population more likely to be sexually victimized by a romantic partner. The responsibility for sexual victimization clearly rests with the perpetrator, and it is important to identify and understand the factors that lead to the perpetration of sexual coercion. However, Few and Rosen (2005) argued that identifying characteristics of victims is essential to understanding the factors that increase risk for sexual victimization. For example, women with BPD traits, especially rejection sensitivity are at a higher risk of being sexually victimized (Young & Furman, 2008; Zanarini, Frankenburg, Hennen, Reich, & Silk, 2005). Sexual compliance might be important for understanding this risk. Thus, it would be beneficial to know under what circumstances people with BPD traits are likely to be sexually compliant, and, looking closer at the association between BPD traits and sexual compliance, a sensitivity to abandonment may be the specific BPD trait that implicates this association.

Sexual compliance refers to a person's willingness to engage in unwanted sex (Katz & Tirone, 2010). Romantic relationships for people with BPD traits are especially prone to dysfunction (Hill et al., 2011; Oliver, Perry, & Cade, 2008), which can manifest in sexual compliance (Katz & Tirone, 2010). In romantic relationships, people with BPD traits may idealize their partner and demand their attention one moment but soon after may devalue their partner and think they are not caring (APA, 2013). Periods of depreciation are typically in response to real or anticipated rejection, which elicits fear of abandonment (Gunderson, 2011). This fear of abandonment uniquely predicts romantic dysfunction in both clinical and community samples (Hill et al., 2011). People with BPD traits may make frantic efforts to avoid rejection by engaging in impulsive actions, such as engaging in unwanted sexual behavior (i.e., sexual compliance; Bouchard, Sabourin, Lussier, & Villeneuve, 2009). And sexual compliance is related to negative outcomes that can implicate further romantic dysfunction. For example, being sexually compliant is associated with higher cortisol levels, indicating increased stress and the myriad negative physiological consequences that accompany stress (Hartmann & Crockett, 2016). Further, being sexually compliant with the purpose of retaining a partner results in decreased relationship satisfaction (Impett et al., 2010).

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Because of an increased sensitivity to losing a partner, people with BPD traits may be more sexually compliant with said partner—a strategy used to retain their relationship. Purdie and Downey (2000) found that fearing abandonment is significantly correlated with being sexually compliant; adolescent girls with this BPD trait even reported that they would do things they know are wrong to keep their partner with them. In a sample of couples in which at least one partner was diagnosed with BPD, Bouchard et al. (2009) reported that sexual compliance is often used to soothe a fear of abandonment—a conclusion based on qualitative data. In a cross-sectional study, Schachner and Shaver (2004) further reported that college students preoccupied with abandonment may be sexually compliant with their romantic partners in order to reassure themselves that their partner cares about them and to make their partner love them more. These findings indicate that people who fear abandonment (e.g., those with BPD trait) may have difficulty setting and enforcing clear boundaries for sexual activity.

1.1. Present study

All of the studies cited on BPD traits, sexual compliance, and fear of abandonment were either correlational or qualitative. We sought to build upon the extant knowledge base by designing a quasi-experimental study to test the relationship between these three constructs. By experimentally manipulating fear of abandonment, we aimed to identify a possible situational factor that influences the previously reported association between BPD traits and sexual compliance (Bouchard et al., 2009; Purdie & Downey, 2000; Schachner & Shaver, 2004). Because of obvious ethical limitations, we examined hypothetical rather than actual sexual compliance.

As for the experimental manipulation, we employed an induction that was similar to Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, and Stucke's (2001) future alone paradigm. The future alone paradigm attempts to prime feelings of rejection. Participants first complete a bogus personality assessment. After receiving an accurate report of their personality, participants are randomly told that—based on their personality characteristics—they will have either successful relationships in the future or unsuccessful ones and end up alone. Twenge et al.'s initial paper found that the future alone paradigm increased aggression; this research team has since used the paradigm to investigate effects on other social psychological constructs, such as prosocial behavior (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007) and self-defeating behavior (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002).

Fear of abandonment is slightly different from general feelings of rejection, so we had to modify the future alone paradigm for the purpose of our study. Essentially, we needed to incorporate the participant’s current romantic relationship into the manipulation for abandonment to be possible. We did this by including a second bogus personality measure that asked participants to report on their partner’s traits. The Quadtritics survey generator then randomly told participants that they and their partner had either matched in the 89th percentile (i.e., highly matched condition) or in the 11th percentile (i.e., poorly matched condition). In addition to the percentile rank, we described what this rank means for them in terms of their relationship status. Participants in the highly matched condition were told that their relationship would likely flourish; those in the poorly matched condition were told that their relationship would likely wither. We also ensured that the poorly matched condition indicated that the differences in personality—though great—are not irreconcilable. We deemed it important to be clear that the participants could do things (e.g., engage in unwanted sexual activity) that would offset their poor match with their partner.

We expected that BPD traits would be significantly correlated with hypothetical sexual compliance (Hypothesis 1). We further predicted that the experimentally induced fear of abandonment would interact with BPD traits to predict hypothetical sexual compliance (Hypothesis 2). Specifically, we anticipated that the association between BPD traits and hypothetical sexual compliance would be stronger for participants in the poorly matched condition (Hypothesis 3).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 161 students in psychology classes at a southeastern university participated in this study and received course credit. We recruited undergraduate females who had at the time been in a romantic relationship for at least two months. Per a priori exclusionary criteria, data were excluded from sixteen participants for responding the same way on every item or not responding to any items, four for being male, and one for not being in a romantic relationship for at least two months. In addition, ten participants indicated that they did not want their data to be analyzed after the revelation that deception was used in this study.

Of the final sample of 130, the average age was 19.05 years (SD = 1.27 years; range: 18–24) and the average length of relationship was 17.19 months (SD = 12.57 months; range: 2–36). The racial demographics of the sample were consistent with the diverse makeup of the university: 49.2% Caucasian, 31.5% African American, 6.2% Asian American, 6.2% Hispanic, and 7.8% other. The sexual orientation of the vast majority of the participants was heterosexual (87.7%); 3.1% reported being homosexual and 9.2% identified as any other orientation.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Personality assessment inventory—borderline features

The Personality Assessment Inventory—Borderline Features (PAI-BOR) is a 24-item self-report measure of borderline personality traits (Morey, 1991). Participants rate items on a four-point scale—false, slightly true, mainly true, and very true. Trull (1995) argued a cutoff of ≥38 be used to indicate the presence of significant BPD traits. In the present sample, 17.7% of participants (N = 23) met this criterion. Trull’s non-clinical sample of undergraduate students demonstrated that the PAI-BOR has good internal consistency (α = 0.73). Higher scores indicate endorsement of more BPD traits (sample α = 0.70).

2.2.2. Big Five Inventory

The Big Five Inventory (BFI) is a 44-item measure that assesses the big five dimensions of personality: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (John & Srivastava, 1999). Participants answered all items for themselves and again with respect to how well each statement describes their current partner. This measure and its results were used as part of the manipulation; the future alone paradigm requires a personality inventory to provide both accurate feedback and randomized bogus scripts. No data from the BFI were analyzed for this study.

2.2.3. Fear of abandonment manipulation

Despite changes to Twenge et al.’s (2001) design, this study’s manipulation retains the structure of the future alone paradigm. Our manipulation randomly assigned participants the following scripts. In the poorly matched condition, the participants were shown:

Based on the results from the questionnaires, it has been calculated that you and your partner have a compatibility rate that is in the 11th percentile. This means that the two of you are better matched than only 11 out of 100 couples. Typically, we see that relationships with match rates this low last shorter amounts of time and have higher rates of conflict. However, couples are able to overcome such personality differences through hard work.

In contrast, people in the highly matched condition were shown:
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