



## Facial expression of emotions in borderline personality disorder and depression

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### Abstract

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is characterized by marked problems in interpersonal relationships and emotion regulation. The assumption of emotional hyper-reactivity in BPD is tested regarding the facial expression of emotions, an aspect highly relevant for communication processes and a central feature of emotion regulation. Facial expressions of emotions are examined in a group of 30 female inpatients with BPD, 27 women with major depression and 30 non-patient female controls. Participants were videotaped while watching two short movie sequences, inducing either positive or negative emotions. Frequency of emotional facial expressions and intensity of happiness expressions were examined, using the Emotional Facial Action Coding System (EMFACS-7, Friesen & Ekman, *EMFACS-7: Emotional Facial Action Coding System, Version 7*. Unpublished manual, 1984). Group differences were analyzed for the negative and the positive mood-induction procedure separately. Results indicate that BPD patients reacted similar to depressed patients with reduced facial expressiveness to both films. The highest emotional facial activity to both films and most intense happiness expressions were displayed by the non-clinical control group. Current findings contradict the assumption of a *general* hyper-reactivity to emotional stimuli in patients with BPD.

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## 1. Introduction

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is characterized by marked problems in interpersonal relationships and emotion regulation. In the bio-social model of BPD, [Linehan \(1993\)](#) has postulated that emotion dysregulation is a central mechanism of the disorder including high sensitivity to emotional stimuli and strong emotional reactivity. So far, empirical testing of the assumption of emotional hyperreactivity in BPD patients has yielded mixed results: In one of the first studies, [Herpertz et al. \(1997\)](#) examined self-reported subjective experiences to emotional stimuli (audio-taped reading of a short story with characteristic stimuli for BPD of loneliness, abandonment, fear): patients with impulsive behaviors (i.e. self-mutilating) showed a strong intensity of emotional responses as well as a tendency towards rapid affect alterations compared to a non-clinical female control group and women with other personality disorders.

In a later study, using slides of the International Affective Picture System (IAPS) as emotional stimuli, [Herpertz, Kunert, Schwenger, and Sass \(1999\)](#) found no evidence for stronger self-reported emotional reactions of BPD patients compared to a non-clinical female control group. The same results for self-report of emotional state were obtained when short film segments were used as stimuli comparing BPD patients to a non-clinical and a clinical control group ([Renneberg, Gebhard, & Barnett, 2005](#)). Whereas data of [Arntz, Klokman, and Sieswerda \(2003\)](#) indicate somewhat stronger subjective emotional responses of BPD patients compared to Cluster C personality disorder patients and a non-clinical control group to a film fragment showing physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, all highly relevant themes for BPD. In the same line, [Veen and Arntz \(2000\)](#) reported that BPD patients gave higher unpleasantness ratings to borderline-specific film clips than a group of cluster C patients and a non-clinical control group.

Studies examining physiological responses (skin conductance response, heart rate change, and startle response) to standardized emotional stimuli (slides of the IAPS) revealed no stronger psychophysiological reactions to emotional stimuli in BPD patients compared to patients with avoidant personality disorder and a non-clinical control group ([Herpertz et al., 2000](#)). Recent data examining neurobiological functioning (also in response to slides of the IAPS) in female patients with BPD indicate enhanced amygdala activation in BPD patients that is supposed to reflect the intense and slowly subsiding reactions to emotional stimuli ([Herpertz, Dietrich, et al., 2001](#)). In another study this research group examined male criminal offenders with BPD in comparison to offenders with psychopathy and a control group. Subjects with BPD showed a physiological response pattern similar to controls. Regarding their facial reactions, however, the corrugator electromyographic activity (frowning) was reduced compared to controls and participants with BPD revealed little facial modulation when viewing pleasant or unpleasant slides ([Herpertz, Werth, et al., 2001](#)).

Another aspect central to emotion regulation, especially important in interpersonal contexts, is the ability to recognize facial expressions of emotions in others. [Wagner and Linehan \(1999\)](#) examined facial expression recognition ability in women

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