

Investigation of the relationship between borderline personality organization and perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships: moderating role of rejection sensitivity

 Haydeh Faraji

Department of Psychology, Faculty of Science and Literature, İstanbul Aydın University, İstanbul, Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

Aims: The study aims to determine the moderator role of rejection sensitivity in the relationship between borderline personality organization and perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships.

Methods: In this study, which has a relational screening model, participants were reached by convenience sampling. Participants consisted of 116 (30.1%) men and 270 (69.9%) women aged 18-45 ($M=27.95\pm 7.25$), who participated in the study voluntarily. Data collecting tools are the socio-demographic data form, Borderline Personality Questionnaire (BPQ), Adulthood Rejection Sensitivity Scale (ARSS), and Romantic Relationship Assessment Inventory (RRAI).

Results: It was concluded that rejection sensitivity has a moderating role in the relationship between borderline personality organization and perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships. Also, it has been determined that a decrease in education level is associated with a higher level of borderline personality organization and perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships.

Conclusion: Findings show that it may be beneficial to target rejection sensitivity in psychotherapeutic practices in order to prevent individuals with borderline personality organization from being harmed in romantic relationships and to increase their romantic relationship quality.

Keywords: Borderline personality organization, borderline personality disorder, rejection sensitivity, abuse, romantic relationships

INTRODUCTION

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a disorder characterized by variability in the individual's self, interpersonal relationships, affect, behavior, cognitive processes, and rejection sensitivity.^{1,2} Romantic relationships are where maladaptive interpersonal functioning of BPD manifests itself most severely.³ High levels of instability in their romantic relationships are frequently observed in them, as evidenced by their propensity to select partners who have mental health issues, low relationship satisfaction, high levels of interpersonal dependence, communication problems, and a history of physical and psychological violence.³

In cases where the prevalence and intensity of borderline personality traits are not high enough to disrupt the daily functionality of the individual, the existence of a borderline personality organization (BPO) is mentioned.⁴ As the level of borderline personality traits increases, the probability of the individual being exposed to abuse increases.^{5,6} Since borderline individuals believe that even their existence in the world is disturbing, they turn to more submissive attitudes in order to neutralize this discomfort and prevent rejection.^{7,8} They have difficulty turning down the offer of sex.⁹ Besides,

their intolerance of separation makes individuals with BPO more susceptible to being in abusive relationships.¹⁰ Individuals with borderline personality disorder have difficulty saying "no" and rejecting other people, even in harmful situations, due to their fear of being rejected and becoming face-to-face with emptiness. Their tendency to act focused on their partners' wishes and expectations and their difficulty in saying no become especially evident in romantic relationships.¹¹

One of the world's most concerning societal issues is abuse in romantic relationships.¹² Researches show that adult abuse rates (especially sexual abuse) are significantly higher in BPD compared with other personality disorders. People with BPD are more prone to become intimate partner violence victims because their separation anxiety makes them unable to protect themselves from their partner's hazardous demands and attitudes.^{10,13,14} Also, it is known that abuse experiences predict more severe clinical presentation and poorer prognosis of BPD, especially suicidality.¹³ Therefore, the aim of the study is to investigate the relationship between borderline personality organization, abuse experiences, and rejection sensitivity.

Corresponding Author: Haydeh Faraji, haydehfaraji1@gmail.com



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The central hypothesis of this study is that rejection sensitivity has a moderating role between borderline personality organization and perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships. It is thought that the research results of the study may be helpful in the psychotherapy processes of people who report romantic relationship abuse. The results obtained may shed light on possible problems that individuals with borderline personality organization and rejection sensitivity may experience in their close relationships, especially in the romantic relationship area. They may encourage preventive psychotherapeutic studies to be carried out before romantic relationship abuse occurs.

METHODS

Permission to use the scales was obtained via e-mail from the researchers who developed the scales used in the study and conducted the validity and reliability studies of their adaptation to Turkish. Information was obtained about the scale items and scoring procedures. Then, an application was made to the İstanbul Aydın University Ethics Committee to evaluate whether the relevant study involved ethical violations. The study was carried out after obtaining the permission of the İstanbul Aydın University Social and Humanistic Sciences Ethics Committee (Date: 13.11.2023 Decision No: 2023/11). Since the necessity of protecting individual rights was prioritized in the research, the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights was complied with throughout the study period. The scales were distributed to the participants along with the informed consent form through online platforms, and no identification information was collected from the participants to protect their privacy. It was stated that the personal information of the participants would not be shared with anyone other than the researchers and that they could leave the research at any time they wanted. It took an average of 20 minutes to fill out the scales.

This study was designed by the relational screening model. The relational scanning model determines the interaction between more than one variable. In the relational scanning model, the direction and level between variables are determined. Participants were reached through convenience sampling method from volunteer individuals living in Istanbul/Turkey. 116 (30.1%) participants were men and 20 (69.9%) were women. 64 (16.6%) were high school graduates, 266 (68.9%) were university graduates, and 56 (14.5%) were graduates. The youngest participant is 18 years old, and the oldest participant is 45 years old, with an average age of 27.95 ± 7.25 .

Data Collection

Socio-demographic data form: The socio-demographic data form, prepared by the researchers for the purpose of the study, consists of age, gender, and education level questions.

Borderline personality questionnaire (BPQ): Poreh et al.¹⁵ adapted it into Turkish by Ceylan.¹⁶ Validity and reliability studies of this scale, which evaluates borderline personality traits according to DSM-IV criteria, have been conducted. This evaluation scale consists of a total of 9 subscales and 80 items. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was

obtained between 0.65 and 0.84, and the Cronbach's α value was found to be 0.94. Nine subscales of the scale; affective instability, impulsivity, abandonment, relationships, suicide/self-mutilation behavior, self-image, intense anger, feeling of emptiness, quasi- psychosis states.¹⁶

Romantic relationship assessment inventory (RRAI): The scale was developed by Kılınçer and Tuzgöl-Dost¹⁷ to determine perceived abuse in romantic relationships. The five-point Likert-type scale consists of 70 items. The lowest score on the scale is 70, and the highest score is 350. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of RRAI was found to be .97. An increase in the score means that the abuse experienced in a romantic relationship increases.¹⁷

Adult rejection sensitivity scale (ARSS): The Scale was developed by Downey and Feldman¹⁸ to measure the level of rejection sensitivity. Berenson et al.¹⁹ developed the adult form of the Rejection Sensitivity Scale. The adult form of the Rejection Sensitivity Scale was adapted into Turkish by Bozkuş and Araz.²⁰ The scale is based on self-report and consists of 9 6-point Likert-type items. Two separate scores are obtained for each defined hypothetical situation: rejection and acceptance expectations. By inverting the acceptance expectation score and multiplying it by the rejection score, the rejection sensitivity score for that item is obtained. In their study, Bozkuş and Araz²⁰ found the Cronbach Alpha coefficient regarding the internal consistency of ARSS to be .62.

Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses of the study were performed using SPSS 27 software. In the first step, Cronbach Alpha coefficients were calculated to evaluate the reliability of the scales. As a result of these calculations, it was determined that the Cronbach Alpha values of all scales were above 0.70.²¹ In the second stage, whether the scales showed normal distribution was meticulously examined. During this review process, it was observed that the kurtosis and skewness coefficients of the scales met the reference values between -2 and +2 specified by HahsVaughn and Lomax.²² All these results show that it is appropriate to use parametric statistical tests in this research.

The level and direction of the relationship between the scales were evaluated using Pearson Correlation analysis. Additionally, to compare the scales according to demographic variables, an Independent Samples t-test was applied, and ANOVA was preferred. Process Macro 4.2 was used for regulatory role analysis. All these analyses were performed with a 95% confidence interval and a p-value of .05 as a reference.

RESULTS

According to Table 1, the kurtosis coefficient of the Romantic Relationship Assessment Inventory is 1.89, the skewness coefficient is 1.62, the kurtosis coefficient of the Adult Rejection Sensitivity Scale is 0.77, the skewness coefficient is 0.69, the kurtosis coefficient of the Borderline Personality Questionnaire is 0.01, the skewness coefficient is 0.97.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and examination of kurtosis and skewness coefficients and cronbach alpha values of romantic relationship assessment inventory, adult rejection sensitivity scale and borderline personality questionnaire

	n	Min	Max	X	SD	kurtosis	skewness	(α)
Romantic relationship assessment inventory	386	70	139	83.93	17.24	1.83	1.62	0.94
Adult rejection sensitivity scale	386	18	96	39.96	14.58	0.77	0.69	0.86
Borderline personality questionnaire	386	6	62	23.42	15.14	0.01	0.97	0.95

Min: Minimum, Max: Maximum, SD: Standart deviation

The internal consistency coefficient, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, was found to be 0.94 for the Romantic Relationship Assessment Inventory, 0.86 for the Adult Rejection Sensitivity Scale, and 0.95 for the Borderline Personality Questionnaire.

When Table 2 is examined, there is a moderate positive correlation between the scores of the Borderline Personality Scale and the Romantic Relationship Evaluation Scale ($r=30$, $p<0.01$).

Table 2. The relationship between perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships, rejection sensitivity, and borderline personality organization

	1	2	3
1. Romantic relationship assessment inventory	1		
2. Adult rejection sensitivity scale	.01	1	
3. Borderline personality questionnaire	.30**	.11*	1

** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$ Name of the test applied: Pearson Correlation Test

A low-level positive correlation was found between the Borderline Personality Scale and Rejection Sensitivity Scale ($r=11$, $p<0.05$) scores.

When the findings of Table 3 show borderline personality traits do not have a predictive effect on abuse in romantic relationships ($B=0.02$, $p>0.05$), rejection sensitivity has a predictive effect on abuse in romantic relationships ($B=-0.21$, $p<0.05$), and the interaction variable is a significant predictor. It was determined that ($B=0.08$, $p<0.05$). It was concluded that rejection sensitivity has a moderating role in the relationship between borderline personality traits and abuse in romantic relationships.

Table 3. Examining the moderating role of adult rejection sensitivity in the relationship between borderline personality organization and perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships

Model	B	SH	T	P	Lower bound	Upper bound
(Constant)	84.13	4.28	19.64	<.001***	[75.71,	92.55]
Borderline personality organization	0.02	0.16	0.13	0.894	[-0.29,	0.34]
Adult rejection sensitivity	-0.21	0.10	-2.06	0.040*	[-0.42,	-0.01]
(BPO)*(ARS)	0.08	0.00	2.18	0.030*	[0.00,	0.02]

$R^2=.10$, $F=14.76$, $p<.001$ ***

*** $p<.001$, ** $p<.01$, * $p<.05$ test used: PROCESS Macro 3.5

The change in the relationship between borderline personality traits and perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships for different levels of rejection sensitivity (low, medium, or high) is presented in Figure.

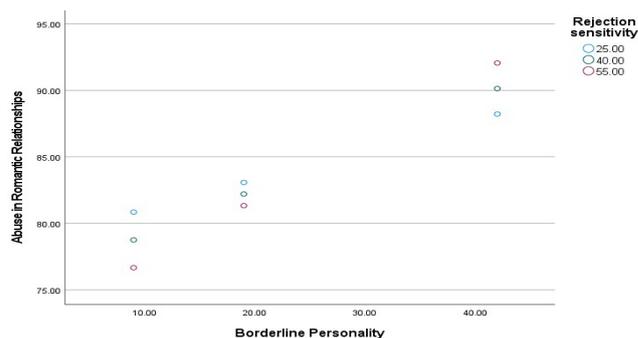


Figure. The moderating role of adult rejection sensitivity in the relationship between borderline personality organization and perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships

According to the Figure, it has been observed that for different levels of rejection sensitivity (low, medium, or high), if borderline personality traits increase, the level of perceived abuse in romantic relationships increases.

According to Table 4, when the scores obtained from the Adult Rejection Sensitivity Scale were evaluated according to educational status, no significant difference was detected between the groups ($p>.05$).

Table 4. Comparison of perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationship, adult rejection sensitivity and borderline personality organization in romantic relationships by educational degree

Dependent variables	Educational status						F(2,383)	p	Post-Hoc
	High school graduate ¹ (n=64)		Graduate ² (n=266)		Post graduate ³ (n=56)				
Romantic relationship assessment inventory	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD	3.66	0.027*	1>2
Adult rejection sensitivity scale	89.19	20.56	82.75	16.27	83.50	16.82	2.31	0.100	-
Borderline personality questionnaire	43.50	18.39	39.35	13.02	38.79	16.33	13.40	<.001***	1>2

SD: Standart deviation, *** $p<.001$, ** $p<.01$, * $p<.05$ test used: one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)

When the scores from the Romantic Relationship Evaluation Scale [$F(2.383)=3.66$, $p<.05$] are examined according to educational status, the results of the Games-Howell findings show that high school graduates have significantly higher scores than university graduates.

When their scores from the Borderline Personality Questionnaire [$F(2.383)=13.40$, $p<.05$] were examined according to educational status, a significant difference was detected between the compared groups. The results of the Games-Howell findings show that those with high school or master's degrees received significantly higher scores than those with university degrees.

DISCUSSION

The central hypothesis of this study was confirmed that rejection sensitivity has a moderating role between borderline personality organization and perceived abuse experiences in romantic relationships. According to the findings, the increase in the level of rejection sensitivity strengthens the relationship between borderline personality organization and perceived abuse in romantic relationships.

Dutton²³ has a nested ecological theory on partner violence, which has a loss of common risk factors with BPD, including having BPD itself in the ontogenetic layer. This theoretical approach examines various environmental factors, emphasizing that IPV is a multidimensional issue. The macrosystem, which focuses on the society in which the victim lives and includes factors like age, education, employment, financial stress, length of relationship, marital status, number of children, previous arrest, spirituality, and social support, is the first level of Dutton's²³ nested ecological model.^{23,24} Similarly, a current study indicates BPO levels become higher when individuals have lower educational degrees, which contributes to unemployment and financial stress. Their romantic relationship lengths are shorter than healthy individuals, and they perceive less social support.²⁵ The exosystem, or social structures in the victim's life, is examined at the second level.¹⁴ This level has lots of common points with BPD, including abuse in past relationships, infidelity, childhood abuse, emotional abuse perpetration/victimization, jealousy, relationship communication, relationship satisfaction, separation, trauma, victim of forced sex, witness intimate partner violence (IPV) in family origin.^{4,10,25-27} The microsystem level of Dutton's model²³ includes BPD itself as a risk factor for partner IPV, and other risk factors of this level are also the most seen components of BPD.¹⁴ These components include alcohol use, substance use, anger, anxious attachment, self-blame, depression, PTSD, impulsivity, low self-esteem, and self-harm tendencies.¹¹

Rejection sensitivity is a predictor of IPV victimization, including unwanted sexual contact and rape.⁷ It predicts IPV victimization through self-silencing. It has been revealed that those with high rejection sensitivity are more likely to ingratiate themselves to a partner, pursue relationships that their support networks disapprove of, and engage in undesirable and unprotected sex in order to escape rejection.²⁸ According to Inman and London's⁷ research, when violence or aggressiveness is used as a means of threatening rejection, people with high rejection sensitivity may also participate in self-silencing or ingratiating behaviors. People with borderline personality organization have fears about being rejected, and they are susceptible to engaging in self-silencing kind of behaviors and attitudes.⁷⁻¹¹

On the other hand, low tolerance to rejection may also lead to IPV victimization. Borderline individuals who encounter stressors exhibit impulsivity in order to get rid of the tension, and impulsivity can lead to possible victimization experiences.²⁹ The feeling of worthlessness is one of the central emotions in borderline personality disorder.^{7,8,11} Therefore, each encounter with the other triggers the sensitivity of rejection, and, subsequently, the feeling of worthlessness, and the resulting stress leads the individual to impulsivity.^{29,30} Individuals diagnosed with borderline personality disorder are more prone to show signs of increased sexual obsession, to participate in sexual activity earlier in life, to be in casual relationships, to be promiscuous, and to have more than one sexual partner, as well as to have homosexual experiences. Individuals with borderline personality disorder also report

being forced to have sex more often, being subjected to date rape or rape by a stranger, and more sexually transmitted diseases. In general, psychological themes related to sexual behavior in borderline personality disorder appear to be characterized by impulsivity and victimization.^{10,13,14,26,29,30}

CONCLUSION

In conclusion of this study, it was determined that rejection sensitivity is an essential factor that strengthens the relationship between borderline personality traits and perceived abusive experiences in romantic relationships. The results do not suggest that people with high BPO and rejection sensitivity provoke violent behavior in their romantic relationships. As a matter of fact, BPO and rejection sensitivity might be best understood as risk factors as opposed to a causation component. Achieving even limited change in all aspects of a personality organization is not always possible. Where possible, it requires a long time and material and moral effort. However, romantic relationships are the area where borderline individuals have the most difficulty.²⁵ Besides, those who engage in IPV practices probably look for partners who seem receptive to rejection or eager to become friends.⁷ In this regard, the current study findings show that it may be beneficial to target rejection sensitivity in psychotherapeutic practices in order to prevent individuals with BPO from being harmed in romantic relationships and to increase their romantic relationship quality. In addition, it has been determined that a low education level is associated with both borderline personality traits and increased exposure to abuse in romantic relationships. This result shows that education, which determines the individual's awareness, economic independence, level, and environment, can also be considered a preventive mental health service. One of the limitations of the study is that the sample group consists of individuals with borderline characteristics, not individuals diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. In light of studies in the literature, it has been observed that rejection sensitivity is associated with exposure to abuse in romantic relationships through self-silencing. In this regard, it is recommended that self-silencing be included in future studies.

ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

Ethics Committee Approval

The study was carried out with the permission of İstanbul Aydın University Social and Humanistic Sciences Ethics Committee (Date: 13.11.2023, Decision No: 2023/11).

Informed Consent

All participants saw the informed consent form on their screen and confirmed by clicking before answering scales.

Referee Evaluation Process

Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial Disclosure

This study has received no financial support.

Author Contributions

All of the authors declare that they have all participated in the design, execution, and analysis of the paper, and that they have approved the final version.

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