



Do borderline personality disorder features and rejection sensitivity predict social network outcomes over time?☆



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ABSTRACT

Social functioning is routinely understood to be disrupted for those with BPD features; however there is little understanding of how BPD features and BPD-relevant traits impact social network characteristics over time. We hypothesized that BPD features negatively predict social network quality and composition and that rejection sensitivity (RS) would affect these relations. To examine this, a sample of female college students ($N = 127$) was recruited and followed over one month. BPD features predicted lower ratings of social network quality and aspects of network composition. BPD features exerted an indirect effect through one-week RS on perceived levels of conflict and criticism as well as on number of partners in the network at one-month follow-up. Moderation analyses revealed that BPD features predicted lower social network satisfaction and support at one month for those with high RS, but did not impact satisfaction or support for those with low RS. These results indicate that even non-clinical levels of BPD psychopathology are related to poor social network outcomes. These findings also highlight RS as a potential mechanism by which BPD features predict lower social support and satisfaction and a potential risk factor for higher conflict and criticism within social networks.

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1. Introduction

Theoretical and empirical accounts point to difficult interpersonal relationships as a major source of distress for those with borderline personality disorder (BPD; Gunderson, 2007; Hilsenroth, Menaker, Peters, & Pincus, 2007). There is increasing evidence that BPD features are related to both objective (e.g., composition of networks) and subjective (e.g., ratings of network quality) social network constructs. In terms of objective social network outcomes, BPD status is related to smaller social networks, measured by fewer interaction partners per day (Stepp, Pilkonis, Yaggi, Morse, & Feske, 2009), and more BPD features predict the generation of fewer partners available to fulfill the need for social support (Zielinski & Veilleux, 2014). BPD criteria are also related to an increased proportion of conflictual or romantic partners in one's social network (e.g., Clifton, Pilkonis, & McCarty, 2007; Daley, Burge, & Hammen, 2000). Consistent with these compositional differences, BPD features have been associated with less satisfaction and support from romantic partners (Bouchard, Sabourin, Lussier, & Villeneuve, 2009; Daley et al., 2000) and from social partners in general (Zielinski & Veilleux, 2014). However, there is increasing evidence that positive

social relationships may result in lower levels of anger, a BPD criterion (Kuhlken, Robertson, Benson, & Nelson-Gray, 2013), and that marriage may positively predict overall global functioning and symptom status over time for those with BPD features (Links & Heslegrave, 2000). Thus, given the protective nature of stable, satisfying relationships and the likelihood that BPD features may interfere with forming or keeping such relationships, it is imperative to determine what predicts high quality relationships at high levels of BPD features.

A growing body of research indicates that problematic social network outcomes are associated with BPD features (e.g., Daley et al., 2000; Zielinski & Veilleux, 2014), even in samples not diagnosed with or selected for BPD status. Understanding social network dysfunction across the continuum of BPD features is important given evidence that even minimal levels of BPD pathology have clinical significance (Zimmerman, Chelminski, Young, Dalrymple, & Martinez, 2012) and subclinical BPD features are longitudinally associated with difficulties in academic achievement, mood, and interpersonal functioning (Trull, Useda, Conforti, & Doan, 1997).

To date, most existing research has examined the effects of BPD features on social network characteristics without considering the impact of vulnerabilities associated with BPD. Examining specific personality characteristics that may put those with BPD features at increased risk for poor social network outcomes or contribute to specific social network characteristics over time can give us a more precise understanding of the interplay between BPD features and disrupted social networks.

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1.1. Rejection sensitivity (RS) and BPD

RS, defined as the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and react strongly to perceived rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996), frequently characterizes BPD, yet the two constructs are not synonymous. The empirical association between BPD features and RS has been demonstrated in several studies (e.g., Berenson, Downey, Rafaeli, Coifman, & Paquin, 2011; Tragesser, Lippman, Trull, & Barrett, 2008) and some researchers have investigated RS as a mechanism through which BPD results in problematic outcomes. Among those diagnosed with BPD, Selby, Ward, and Joiner (2010) found that BPD symptoms predicted RS, which predicted dysregulated emotions and eating behavior. In undergraduate samples, RS mediated the relation between BPD features and facial trust appraisal (Miano, Fertuck, Arntz, & Stanley, 2013) and between BPD features and number of social contacts (Zielinski & Veilleux, 2014). However, Zielinski and Veilleux (2014) found that RS did not mediate the relation between BPD features and social support satisfaction. These results can be interpreted to suggest that elevated fears of social rejection in BPD may decrease regulatory ability, leading to impulsive behaviors, less trust of others, and fewer social contacts but that the relation between BPD and satisfaction with one's social support may be a direct effect, not dependent on RS. While the association between BPD and RS across investigations suggests that RS may be important in understanding how and when BPD features predict social network characteristics, these meditational studies were all cross-sectional, limiting our understanding of temporal links.

Assessing the composition and quality of social networks can be a daunting task given the number of decisions that must be made to appropriately operationalize and define the construct. One of the first decisions is whether the social network should be examined at one time point or over time. The majority of compositional research to date has examined social network differences between those with BPD and various control participants either at one time point to assess how BPD features and social network qualities are concurrently related (e.g., Clifton et al. (2007)) or over relatively short time periods (e.g., one week; Stepp et al., 2009) to determine how particular interactions impact short-term outcomes such as mood. However, these designs do not permit an investigation of how social networks are affected by BPD features over time. Second, who is considered to be in one's social network is an important aspect of social network research. Some researchers have assessed specific relationships (e.g., romantic partners; Bouchard et al., 2009) while others have examined partners who might be available in particular contexts (e.g., Zielinski & Veilleux, 2014). While these designs are informative, it is also important to assess social networks more broadly, as those with whom the individual frequently interacts may impact their emotional functioning and available support.

1.2. Current study

We examined how BPD features impacted social network characteristics using ratings of social network relationships over time. Existing research provides some insight into specific characteristics of the social networks of those with BPD and BPD features using various methods, such as daily diary assessment and cross-sectional self-report. However, this research is limited and there is no consensus on the best methods to assess social networks. Given this, we developed a measure, described below, to assess relationships with all partners with whom individuals frequently interact. Based on previous findings, we assessed composition of the social networks (e.g., number of total partners, romantic partners, and partners to whom one had stopped speaking) as well as the quality of each relationship (i.e., satisfaction, support, conflict, and criticism). We tested whether BPD features predicted social network characteristics one month later.

We also assessed the influence of RS on these associations. While several studies have examined RS as a mediator of the relations between BPD and socially relevant outcomes (e.g., Miano et al., 2013; Zielinski & Veilleux, 2014), RS also has been tested as a moderator that amplifies risk for deficits in social functioning at higher levels of BPD features (Gardner, Qualter, Stylianou, & Robinson, 2010). We tested RS as both a moderator and a mediator of the relations between BPD features and social network outcomes to clarify whether RS is the mechanism through which these relations exist or a risk factor for poor social outcomes for those with BPD features. Examining interpersonal relationships in this manner allows for a more complete picture of social networks and BPD features and a better understanding of potential risk factors and mechanisms for disrupted network quality.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

This study was open to all female introductory psychology students. Because BPD is primarily diagnosed in women (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and there are tend to be differences in social networks (Kendler, Myers, & Prescott, 2005) and RS (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998) based on gender, we limited participation to female students. At baseline, participants completed consent forms and questionnaires assessing personality variables (i.e., BPD features, RS) and social network characteristics. One week and one month after baseline, participants were emailed a link to complete the same questionnaires. Participants were compensated with either partial course credit or online gift cards (because the semester ended prior to study completion for some participants).

The sample consisted of 127 female students at a large Midwestern university. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 ($M = 19.57$,

Table 1
Baseline means, standard deviations, and correlations.

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. PAI-BOR ^a	21.02	10.07	–							
2. RSQ ^b	8.86	3.32	.26**	–						
3. Total partners	11.17	6.29	.04	–.14	–					
4. Romantic partners	1.09	1.94	.20*	–.07	.36**	–				
5. Cut-off partners	.95	1.41	.35**	.18*	.25**	.23**	–			
6. Satisfaction	2.42	.39	–.42**	–.28**	–.24**	–.16	–.37**	–		
7. Support	2.38	.47	–.25**	–.16	–.23*	–.10	–.33**	–.58**	–	
8. Conflict	1.38	.52	.34**	.40**	–.31**	–.09	.08	–.21*	.05	–
9. Criticism	.86	.52	.22*	.29**	–.26**	–.01	.01	–.06	.05	.46**

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

^a Personality Assessment Inventory – Borderline subscale.

^b Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire.

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