



# Personality styles in a non-clinical sample: The role of emotion dysregulation and impulsivity

P. Velotti<sup>a,\*</sup>, C. Garofalo<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Genoa, Department of Educational Sciences, Corso Andrea Podestà, 2, 16126 Genoa, Italy

<sup>b</sup>Sapienza – University of Rome, Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, via degli Apuli, 1, 00185 Rome, Italy



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## ABSTRACT

Theories of personality and personality disorders are increasingly considering the centrality of emotion regulation and its dimensions. Impulsivity as well is recognized as a personality trait underlying diverse symptom presentations. Although research in this field has mainly regarded borderline personality disorder, recent studies supported the association of both emotion dysregulation and impulsivity with personality styles across all clusters. In the present study, we sought to extend extant research by investigating the joint contribution of selected difficulties in emotion regulation and impulsivity to traits of four personality styles in a community sample ( $N = 399$ , mean age = 37.91, 56.6% males). In particular, we focused on depressive, masochistic, passive-aggressive and sadistic personality styles. Multiple regression analyses showed the unique association of several domains of emotion dysregulation with all personality styles examined. Nonacceptance of emotional response was significantly and positively related with scores of all personality styles. Lack of emotional awareness was also characteristic of different styles. Beyond these similarities, distinct patterns were able to distinguish between externalizing (sadistic and passive-aggressive), and internalizing (depressive and masochistic) traits. Beyond the role of emotion dysregulation, trait impulsivity was also related to masochistic, passive-aggressive, and sadistic traits, independently explaining a significant amount of additional variance.

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## 1. Introduction

Difficulties in emotion regulation and impulse control are considered relevant components of maladaptive personality functioning and personality disorders (PD), yet research on emotion dysregulation and impulsivity has mainly regarded their influence on borderline PD and antisocial PD (Scott, Stepp, & Pilkonis, 2014).

Although not recognized as official diagnoses but only listed as PD Not Otherwise Specified (NOS), a handful of other PD styles have historically been considered for their relevance in the study of personality functioning, as well as for their contribution to other PDs, namely: depressive PD, masochistic PD, passive-aggressive PD, and sadistic PD (Kernberg, 1992; Millon, 2006).

Even though they are not included in the official diagnostic systems, the prevalence of PD NOS among all PDs has been reported as ranging from 21% to 49% (Verheul & Widiger, 2004). Other authors suggested that “the majority of patients with personality pathology significant enough to warrant clinical psychotherapeutic attention are currently undiagnosable on axis II” (Westen &

Arkowitz-Westen, 1998, p. 1769). Among these, depressive, masochistic, passive-aggressive, and sadistic PD have been the most discussed, even though only sparsely investigated by researchers (Kernberg, 1992; Millon, Grossman, Millon, Meagher, & Ramnath, 2004). For instance, Johnson et al. (1999) found in an adolescent sample that PD diagnoses included in the appendix to DSM-IV (i.e., depressive and passive-aggressive PD) were more predictive of subsequent development of major mental disorders than either cluster A, B or C PDs. Of note, different measures largely used for personality assessment still include these personality styles (e.g., Millon, 2006), yet results concerning them are rarely presented.

To our knowledge, little is known about whether emotion dysregulation and impulsivity could also characterize these personality styles. Thus, in the present study we first reviewed the extant literature, and then empirically tested the associations between emotion dysregulation, impulsivity and traits of each of these PD styles in a large community sample.

### 1.1. Emotion dysregulation, impulsivity and personality styles

According to their description (see Table 1), people with traits of all personality styles considered in this study could somehow

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39 01020953722; fax: +39 010 20953728.

E-mail addresses: [patrizia.velotti@unige.it](mailto:patrizia.velotti@unige.it), [patrizia.velotti@tin.it](mailto:patrizia.velotti@tin.it) (P. Velotti), [carlo.garofalo@uniroma1.it](mailto:carlo.garofalo@uniroma1.it), [cgarofalo24@gmail.com](mailto:cgarofalo24@gmail.com) (C. Garofalo).

suffer from difficulties in emotion regulation and impulse control. Nonetheless, despite several clinical observations and influential theoretical works (Millon, 2006), there is a dearth of empirical research addressing the role of emotion dysregulation and impulsivity in explaining features of these PD styles. For instance, research has shown that people with depressive PD traits are prone to both negative affectivity and emotional lability (Huprich, 2009), with an associated lack of confidence in their own ability to modulate intense emotional experience (Chen, Huprich, & Hsiao, 2011). People with masochistic PD traits often experience complex mix of negative emotions that they struggle to describe, with the associated belief that little can be done to feel better (Millon et al., 2004). Leith and Baumeister (1996) also reported how self-defeating behavior was associated to bad moods and co-occurring impairment in self-regulation.

In addition, passive-aggressive strategies are often regarded as a maladaptive way to cope with unwanted emotions, especially anger and sadness (Millon et al., 2004; Rivers, Brackett, Katulak, & Salovey, 2007). Further, Fossati et al. (2007) found in a clinical sample that trait impulsivity was uniquely and positively related to passive-aggressive PD.

Sadistic features were also related to poor affect regulation (Ruiz, Salazar, & Caballo, 2012), whose violent acts may represent an extremely dysfunctional form to regulate feelings of humiliation, weakness or anger (Meloy, 1997). Sadistic personality traits have also been linked with the inability to cope adaptively with those emotions that drive their vicious behaviors (Millon et al., 2004). Indeed, the atmosphere of fear usually created by violent and sadistic individuals could be considered as a frantic effort to cope with unbearable negative feelings (Elison, Garofalo, & Velotti, 2014; Velotti, Elison, & Garofalo, 2014). Finally, individuals with sadistic PD traits are described as deriving pleasure through subjugating, controlling and causing pain to others as an affect-driven impulse, which has received little empirical attention (Meloy, 1997).

Unfortunately, to our knowledge only one study has directly investigated the link between emotion dysregulation facets and these personality styles. Indeed, Ruiz et al. (2012) found that different dimensions of emotion dysregulation were positively related to sadistic, masochistic, depressive and passive-aggressive PD. Notably, the strongest correlation coefficients were found with respect to depressive PD, with effect sizes comparable to those regarding borderline PD. However, Ruiz et al. (2012) only considered zero-

order correlations, thus failing to account for the high degree of shared variance among dimensions of emotion dysregulation (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). This prevent us from understanding whether these PDs are characterized by specific, as opposed to general, difficulties in emotion regulation, as well as to distinguish different PDs in terms of impairment in distinct emotion regulation facets.

As a whole, the evidence reviewed above seems to confirm that both emotion dysregulation and impulsivity are relevant to understand features of depressive, masochistic, passive-aggressive, and sadistic personality styles. However, some scholars argued that impulsivity in PDs could only represent a facet of underlying emotion dysregulation (Sebastian, Jacob, Lieb, & Tüscher, 2013). In this case, when controlling for the variance explained by emotion dysregulation, impulsivity should no longer be significantly associated with PDs traits. Other studies showed that impulsivity only partially mediated the relationship between emotion dysregulation and alcohol misuse (Garofalo & Velotti, 2014), and that impulsivity additionally and independently predicted borderline PD and other PDs after controlling for emotion dysregulation (Garofalo et al., 2014). These findings suggested that, in spite of their partial overlapping, both emotion dysregulation and impulsivity could play an independent role in explaining traits of PDs.

In the present study, we sought to examine features of depressive, masochistic, passive-aggressive, and sadistic PD, in terms of their associations with emotion dysregulation and impulsivity. Accordingly, we examined the unique association between dimensions of emotion dysregulation and impulsiveness with traits of the above mentioned personality styles, controlling for their shared variance. We expected that emotion dysregulation was associated with all personality styles considered. However, according to Garofalo et al.'s (2014) findings, we expected that nonacceptance of emotional responses and lack of emotional awareness confirmed their associations with all PDs. Further, we hypothesized that depressive PD features were associated with a lack of confidence in personal ability to regulate emotions by accessing to effective strategies (Chen et al., 2011). We also expected that depressive PD was the most affected by difficulties in emotion regulation, in terms of total amount of explained variance (Ruiz et al., 2012). Finally, we expected that impulsivity additively predicted sadistic and passive-aggressive PD features (Fossati et al., 2007; Meloy, 1997).

**Table 1**

Description and last appearance in DSM nosography of personality disorders included in the present study.

Personality disorder	Last appearance in DSM	Description (APA, 1987, 2000; Millon, 2006)
Depressive	Appendix of the DMS-IV-TR (APA, 2000) among PD NOS	A pervasive pattern of depressive cognitions and behaviors beginning by early adulthood and occurring in a variety of contexts, which occurs before, during, and after major depressive episodes, representing a distinct diagnosis not included in the definition of either major depressive episodes or dysthymic disorder.
Masochistic	Appendix of the DSM-III-R (APA, 1987) among PD NOS	A pervasive pattern of self-defeating behavior, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts. These persons often avoid or undermine pleasurable experiences, be drawn to situations or relationships in which they will suffer, and prevent others from helping them.
Passive-aggressive	Appendix of the DMS-IV-TR (APA, 2000) among PD NOS	A pervasive pattern of negativistic attitudes and passive resistance to demands for adequate performance, beginning by early adulthood and present in various contexts. Characteristic of these persons is an intense conflict dependence on other and the desire for self-assertion. They are often overtly ambivalent, wavering indecisively from one course of action to its opposite. They may follow an erratic path that causes endless wrangles with others and disappointment for themselves.
Sadistic	Appendix of the DSM-III-R (APA, 1987) among PD NOS	A pervasive pattern of cruel, demeaning and aggressive behavior, beginning by early adulthood, not been directed toward only one person and has not been solely for the purpose of sexual arousal (as in sexual sadism). These persons are characterized by callous, vicious, manipulative, and degrading behavior expressed towards other people.

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