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### Borderline personality traits and romantic relationship dissolution

Kenneth TAN

*Singapore Management University, kennethtan@smu.edu.sg*

Samantha H. INGRAM

*Purdue University*

Laura Anne LAU

*Singapore Management University, lauralau.2016@business.smu.edu.sg*

Susan SOUTH

*Purdue University*

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Borderline Personality Disorder Traits and Romantic Relationship Dissolution

### Abstract

Many studies have found that borderline personality disorder (BPD) is associated with romantic relationship instability, with relationship dissolution being a recurring theme. Scant research, however, has examined the dissolution strategies and post-breakup outcomes for individuals with elevated levels of borderline traits. Findings from two studies revealed that there was an association between BPD criteria and tendency to employ less adaptive dissolution strategies when terminating a relationship. Furthermore, elevated levels of BPD traits were associated with less self-concept clarity and more unwanted pursuit of ex-partners. These findings provide insight into how individuals with BPD traits experience relationship dissolution and suggests possible factors underlying the unstable relationship processes typically associated with borderline traits.

*Keywords:* Borderline personality disorder, close relationship, relationship dissolution, relationship dissolution strategies

### **Borderline Personality Disorder Traits and Romantic Relationship Dissolution**

Individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) often experience volatility and instability in their romantic relationships (Agrawal et al., 2004; Gunderson, 2007). These relationships are characterized by idealization/devaluation of partners and desperate attempts to avoid abandonment, among other maladaptive interpersonal cognitions and behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2013; Berenson et al., 2011). Individuals with BPD traits often experience emotional dysregulation that interferes with successful romantic relationship functioning, resulting in lower relationship satisfaction and higher levels of interpersonal conflict (Beeney et al., 2019). These difficulties are often associated with the dissolution of the relationship (Whisman & Schonbrun, 2009).

Despite substantial research documenting the maladaptive processes by which BPD features impact romantic relationship functioning, it remains unclear how BPD traits relate to engagement in relationship dissolution processes. Understanding how individuals with elevated BPD traits engage in romantic relationship dissolution processes is particularly relevant, given that these individuals have a greater likelihood of experiencing relationship dissolution (Daley et al., 2000; Ullrich et al., 2007) and marital disruption (Disney et al., 2012; Lavner et al., 2015). Hence, the aim of our current study is to examine the romantic relationship dissolution strategies of individuals with elevated BPD pathology, as well as their behaviors and emotions post-breakup.

### **Borderline Personality Disorder and Romantic Relationship Functioning**

BPD is characterized by a pervasive pattern of emotional instability, interpersonal and romantic relationship dysregulation, as well as marked impulsivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Symptoms of the disorder must be present by early adulthood to meet diagnosis and BPD is estimated to be more prevalent in females (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; but see Grant et al., 2008). BPD, like most PDs, is generally

conceptualized as a dimensional construct (Hopwood et al., 2018; Widiger et al., 2009). The high degree of overlap between sum total of traits and impairment (Sleep et al., 2019) suggests that severity is parallel with traits.

Romantic relationship dysfunction is particularly prominent amongst individuals with BPD traits (Hill et al., 2008). For example, difficulties with emotion regulation (i.e. difficulty in controlling, accepting, and modulating emotions; Hopwood et al., 2012) have been consistently associated with BPD traits, likely resulting in greater fluctuations in unpleasant affect (Stein, 1996; Trull et al., 2008), greater daily conflict and hurt feelings (South, 2014), and frequent engagement in negative communication behaviours (Miano et al., 2017). Individuals high in BPD traits are also likely to have relationships characterized by high levels of intensity, aggression, and conflict (Lazarus et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, elevated levels of BPD traits are thus associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction and higher levels of marital problems (Lieb et al., 2004; South, et al., 2008), which increase the chances of relationship dissolution.

Given that individuals high in BPD traits are particularly sensitive to interpersonal threats and rejection (Hopwood et al., 2012; Lazarus et al., 2018), some researchers have explored the disorder in the context of attachment theory. Meta-analytic work has shown that there is a close association between BPD traits and attachment anxiety ( $r = .48$ ) as well as avoidance ( $r = .30$ ; Smith & South, 2020), which is likely to be relevant to how individuals high in BPD traits react to interpersonal threat and rejection, especially in the context of relationship dissolution. For example, BPD traits are associated with fluctuations between intense idealization and devaluation of close others; experiencing desire for closeness and intimacy with a partner while simultaneously experiencing mistrust and fear of their partner (Hopwood et al., 2014; Zanarini & Frankenburg, 2007). This vacillation between the desire for closeness to and distance from a romantic partner is also evident in the relationship

dissolution process, as individuals high in BPD traits often cycle between breaking up and reconciling with their partner (Bouchard et al., 2009) and tend to engage in more frequent relationships of a shorter duration than those lower in BPD traits (Navarro-Gómez et al., 2017; Lazarus et al., 2019). However, there is a lack of empirical knowledge about how individuals with BPD engage in the relationship dissolution process.

### **Relationship Dissolution Strategies**

Individuals experiencing relationship dissolution may view it as a painful event, causing emotional upheaval, regardless of their role in the break-up (i.e. the person who ends the relationship as well as the recipient of the break-up) (Perilloux & Buss, 2008; Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006). Using community and student samples (Study 1,  $n = 401$ ; Study 2,  $n = 114$ ; Study 3,  $n = 107$ ; Study 4,  $n = 153$ ; Study 5,  $n = 97$ ), Collins and Gillath (2012) updated a list of relationship dissolution strategies originally proposed by Baxter (1982; 1984). These strategies vary in their level of directness and compassion and were updated to account for modern day break-up strategies such as “changing my relationship status on a webpage (e.g., Facebook)”. The list includes seven empirically identified break-up strategies: avoidance/withdrawal (e.g. avoiding contact with the partner); positive tone/self-blame (e.g. taking the blame for the break up); open confrontation (e.g. providing honest explanations for the break up); cost escalation (e.g. making the relationship increasingly unpleasant); manipulation (e.g. hinting to other people that they wish for a break up), distant/mediated communication (e.g. terminating the relationship indirectly); and de-escalation (e.g. suggesting that the break up is temporary).

Direct relationship dissolution strategies (i.e., *open confrontation*), were thought to reflect honesty to the partner. They were associated with fewer negative post breakup outcomes, such as less anger and distress for the recipient as well as lower likelihood of reunification. However, even though open confrontation could be seen as a strategy that

reflects concern and compassion to a partner in part due to honesty, the actual message delivered might be potentially devastating and hurtful (e.g., “We broke up because of your family background/you are no longer attractive to me” etc.). Conversely, indirect dissolution strategies (i.e., *avoidance/withdrawal; manipulation; distant/mediated communication*) were found to be associated with more negative post breakup outcomes for the recipient such as anger and distress. Strategies that allow for continued access to ex-partners (i.e., *positive tone/self-blame; de-escalation*) were associated with a higher likelihood of remaining friends after breakup as well as having a higher desire for reunification (Collins & Gillath, 2012). Beyond the factors of anxiety and avoidance (Collins & Gillath, 2012) and Machiavellianism (Brewer & Abell, 2017), there is little research investigating the *selection* of relationship dissolution strategies in individuals with other personality features.

### **BPD Traits and Romantic Relationship Dissolution Strategies**

As noted above, previous research has found that individuals with elevated BPD traits are more likely to be insecurely attached (Bouchard et al., 2009; Navarro-Gómez et al., 2017; Smith & South, 2020), which is associated with maladaptive responses to interpersonal threat and rejection, and likely, selection of relationship dissolution strategies. Given that high levels of BPD traits are associated with anger, hostility, and aggression (Hopwood et al., 2012; Berenson et al., 2011), we hypothesized that individuals with elevated BPD traits would engage in relationship dissolution strategies characterized by hyper-reactivity and volatility, namely the dissolution strategies of open confrontation as well as cost escalation. The use of open confrontation could entail the use of hurtful albeit honest reasons for breakup, whereas the use of cost escalation would be deemed as hostile, hastening the relationship dissolution process.

Furthermore, since BPD traits are associated with avoidant attachment styles, we expected that some individuals high in BPD traits would engage in deactivating strategies

that characterize avoidant attachment by using distancing in response to perceived rejection and conflict (Levy et al., 2015). As such, we hypothesized that individuals with elevated BPD traits would employ the indirect dissolution strategies of avoidance/withdrawal, manipulation and distant/mediated communication. The use of these strategies could allow for individuals with BPD traits to focus on increasing a sense of security for the self, especially during a distressing time such as a breakup.

Finally, because BPD traits are associated with emotional instability, anxious attachment, and oscillating views of others, relationship dissolution strategies that reflect continued attachment and allow for continued contact with an ex-partner may also be appealing to individuals high in BPD traits (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Thus, we also hypothesized that individuals with BPD would engage in the strategies that allow for continued and increased contact to ex-partners, namely positive tone/self-blame and de-escalation dissolution strategies.

### **BPD and Relationship Dissolution Outcomes**

Prior research has shown that the termination of a romantic relationship can result in a host of negative outcomes in terms of post breakup distress, such as the onset of depressive disorders (Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006), a loss of self-esteem (Perilloux & Buss, 2008) and increased felt insecurity (Davis et al., 2003). These outcomes are not limited to emotions but extend to post-breakup behavior such as continued contact with an ex-partner (Tan et al., 2015) and unwanted pursuit (De Smet et al., 2015). Studies have established that outcomes after relationship dissolution vary based on individual differences. For example, securely attached individuals report less post-breakup distress compared with anxiously and avoidantly attached individuals (Davis et al., 2003). Anxiously attached individuals report greater rumination and distress (Mikulincer et al., 2003), whereas avoidantly attached individuals reported *less* post-breakup distress, but more maladaptive coping behaviors such



as drug use and greater distancing (Birnbaum et al., 1997). Given that BPD traits are associated with both anxious and avoidant attachment styles as well as emotion dysregulation, it seems likely that outcomes following relationship dissolution could vary within the population.

Prior research has shown that individuals high in BPD traits make more negative appraisals toward behaviors initiated by their partners (Bhatia et al., 2013), thus, they may experience breakups more negatively than others, leading to greater distress and more negative emotions toward their ex-partners. Given the association between BPD traits and cyclical idealization/devaluation of their partners, it is possible these individuals would have a greater desire for reunification with their ex-partner. This, combined with impulsivity and preoccupation with ex-partners, might make it more likely for individuals high in BPD traits to engage in higher levels of unwanted pursuit of their ex-partners after breakup (De Smet et al., 2015). Finally, since individuals high in BPD traits often experience an unstable sense of self, (Neacsiu et al., 2015), it is possible that these individuals would be more likely to experience a loss of sense of self-concept when faced with relationship dissolution.

### **Current Research**

Given the lack of extensive empirical research on the relationship dissolution process experienced by individuals with elevated levels of borderline PD pathology, the aim of the current research was to explore how BPD traits are associated with relationship dissolution strategies and outcomes after breakup. Study 1 examined the influence of BPD traits on the way individuals chose to employ relationship dissolution strategies. Study 2 examined the influence of BPD traits on the distress and behavioral outcomes experienced after breakup. Previous research has found inconsistent effects of gender differences in the effects of BPD traits on relationship outcomes (e.g., Weinstein et al., 2012; Stroud et al., 2010), so we had no a priori hypothesis about gender differences of the influence of BPD traits. Hence, we also

examined if the effects of BPD traits on relationship dissolution strategies and outcomes differed as a function of gender (Lavner et al., 2015).

### **Study 1**

The aim of Study 1 was to examine the association between elevated BPD traits and endorsement of relationship dissolution strategies when ending a romantic relationship. We also examined whether the Five Factor Model (FFM) personality traits would be associated with relationship dissolution strategies in conjunction with BPD traits, which enabled us to evaluate whether BPD traits are associated with dissolution strategies above and beyond Big Five personality traits. Tests were run with each dissolution strategy as a dependent variable, and our significance level was set at  $\alpha = \frac{0.05}{7} = .007$  to correct for multiple tests.

### **Method**

#### ***Participants and procedure***

Participants were 274 individuals who enrolled in this research study via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants received monetary compensation of USD\$1 in exchange for their voluntary participation. 44 participants were eliminated for failing attention checks, bringing the final sample size to  $N = 230$  ( $M_{age} = 37.16$ ,  $SD = 10.57$ ; White = 67.4%; Black = 17.8%; Hispanic = 7.4%, Asian = 5.7%; Others = 1.7%). The sample of participants consisted of 92 men, 137 women, and 1 individual of an undisclosed gender. We conducted post-hoc power analysis using G\*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to evaluate the power achieved in this study with our sample size based on an alpha level of .007 and our smallest effect size of  $R^2 = .13$ . For a multiple regression model with 2 predictors, our power was .99.

The research study was administered completely online. Participants were tasked to complete several measures about relationships and personality. Only the measures described below were used in the current analyses. They also completed several demographic questionnaires before being debriefed about the study.

### **Measures**

**Borderline personality traits.** The Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire – Version 4 (PDQ-4; Hyler, 1994) was used to assess maladaptive personality traits according to the PD criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Participants were required to answer either “True” or “False” to 99 statements if it generally described them over the past several years. For the current study, only the BPD subscale was used. The total score represents the number of criteria (out of 9 possible) endorsed ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ). For reference, adult community samples in a recent study (Fossati et al., 2016) had a mean of 2.28 (SD = 1.96) and a college sample (Okada & Oltmanns, 2009) had a mean of 2.0.

**Big Five Personality.** Participants completed the Five-Factor Model Rating Form, which is a brief instrument for assessing ratings of personality as proposed by the five-factor model (FFMRF; Mullins-Sweatt et al., 2006). The measure is comprised of 30 items, with 6 items designed to measure each of the five personality dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. All items were rated using a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (*extremely low*) to 5 (*extremely high*). The internal reliabilities of the subscales ranged from .71 to .84.

**Relationship Dissolution Strategies.** The Breakup Strategies Questionnaire (Collins & Gillath, 2012) was used to assess participants’ breakup strategies. Participants were asked to think about their most recent breakup or break-ups in general. Participants indicated the extent to which they have used the 43 items statements from the seven strategies to breakup with a partner: (a) avoidance/withdrawal (11 items) (e.g. “*I disclosed little about my personal activities and interests whenever we talked*”), (b) positive tone/self-blame (10 items) (e.g. “*I tried to prevent my partner from having any “hard feelings” about the breakup*”), (c) open confrontation (4 items) (e.g. “*I verbally explained to my partner my reasons for desiring the breakup*”), (d) cost escalation (4 items) (e.g. “*I became unpleasant to my partner in the hops*”).

*that s/he will make the first move*”), (e) manipulation (5 items) (e.g. *“I gave hints of my desire to breakup to people who know the other person”*), (f) distant/mediated communication (4 items) (e.g. *“I terminated the relationship indirectly”*), and (g) de-escalation (5 items) (e.g. *“I “waited out” until conditions were conducive to the breakup”*). Each item was rated on a scale from 1 (*“did not use this strategy”*) to 7 (*“definitely used this strategy”*). Each dimension demonstrated an acceptable level of reliability: (a) avoidance/withdrawal ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ), (b) positive tone/self-blame ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ), (c) open confrontation ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ), (d) cost escalation ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ), (e) manipulation ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ), (f) distant/mediated communication ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), and (g) de-escalation ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

### **Results and Discussion**

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are reported in Table 1. We used multiple regression analyses in SPSS to test for 1) main effects of FFM personality traits, 2) main effect of BPD score, and 3) any two-way interactions between centered BPD traits and gender on the relationship dissolution strategies of avoidance/withdrawal, positive tone/self-blame, open confrontation, cost escalation, manipulation, distant/mediated communication, and de-escalation. There were no significant two-way interactions between gender and BPD on the seven dissolution strategies (see Table 2), so we report only the main effects of BPD on dissolution strategies (controlling for FFM traits).

Consistent with the hypothesis regarding BPD traits and aggression and volatility, there was a significant main effect of BPD traits on open confrontation, cost escalation, and manipulation. Also consistent with hypothesis regarding BPD traits and continued attachment, there was a significant main effect of BPD traits on de-escalation and positive tone/self-blame. Finally, consistent with our hypothesis regarding BPD traits and utilizing indirect strategies due to distancing, there was a significant main effect of BPD traits on avoidance/withdrawal and distant/mediated communication.

The association between BPD traits and all relationship dissolution strategies remained significant even when controlling for FFM personality traits. Furthermore, based on our corrected alpha level, conscientiousness was associated with greater use of manipulation, de-escalation and distant/mediated communication, whereas extraversion was associated with less manipulation and distant/mediated communication. Thus, FFM traits did not demonstrate a similarly broad pattern of relations with dissolution strategies as demonstrated and found for BPD traits.

## **Study 2**

The aim of Study 2 was to examine the associations between BPD traits and affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to breakup. In light of our Study 1 instructions, which examined breakup strategies in general, it might have been possible that participants had no previous relationship experiences. To circumvent this limitation, we asked participants about their most recent breakup, and they were excluded if they reported not having any prior relationship history or breakup experiences before.

## **Method**

### ***Participants and Procedure***

Participants were 363 individuals who enrolled in this research study via Amazon Mechanical Turn (MTurk), separate from Study 1. Participants received monetary compensation of USD\$1 in exchange for their voluntary participation. 167 participants were eliminated for failing attention checks and 47 participants were eliminated for having no prior relationship breakup experience, bringing the final sample size to  $N = 149$  ( $M_{age} = 36.70$ ,  $SD = 11.66$ ; White = 75.2%; Black = 10.7%; Hispanic = 6.7%, Asian = 4.0%; Others = 3.4%). The average length of time between break-up and study completion was 14.07 ( $SD = 23.62$ ) months. The sample of participants consisted of 64 men, 84 women, and 1 individual of an undisclosed gender. We conducted post-hoc power analysis using G\*Power (Faul et al.,

2007) to evaluate the power achieved in this study with our sample size based on an alpha level of .05 and our smallest effect size of  $R^2 = .05$ . For a multiple regression model with 2 predictors, our power was .80.

The research study was administered online and participants were tasked to complete the PDQ-4 (Hyler, 1994), questions related to breakup distress, self-concept clarity via the Loss of Self Scale (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007), and the Unwanted Pursuit Scale (Davis et al., 2000). They also completed several demographic questionnaires before being debriefed.

### **Measures**

**Borderline Personality Traits.** As in Study 1, BPD traits were assessed by the PDQ-4 BPD subscale (Hyler, 1994;  $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

**Big Five Personality.** As in Study 1, participants completed the FFMRF to measure Big Five personality traits as a control (all  $\alpha = 0.70 - .81$ ).

**Breakup Distress and Reunification.** Participants were asked to complete items from the Assessment of Relationship Changes scale (Agnew et al., 2006) to assess distress after breakup as well as desire for reunification concerning their most recent breakup. We asked participants to think about their last romantic relationship with a prompt (To begin, please think back to your last romantic relationship...). A 2-item measure was used to measure distress with the breakup (“How emotionally draining was the breakup” and “How difficult was the breakup”,  $\alpha = 0.93$ ) on a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at all*, 10 = *Extremely*). A 2-item measure each was used to measure positive and negative emotions towards the ex-partner (“To what extent do you experience feelings of happiness/contentment when think about your ex-partner now”,  $\alpha = 0.85$ ; and “To what extent do you experience feelings of hate/contempt when think about your ex-partner now”,  $\alpha = 0.84$ ) on a 9-point scale (0 = *Not at all*, 8 = *Completely*). Finally, a 1-item measure (“how much would you like to reunite with

your ex-partner”) was used to measure desire of reunification on an 11-point scale (0 = *Absolutely not*, 10 = *Definitely*).

***Loss of Self.*** Participants completed the Loss of Self and Rediscovery of Self (LOSROS; Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007), a 12-item 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a great deal*) that assessed clarity regarding their self-concept after their most recent breakup. Example items include “I do not feel like myself anymore” and “I have lost my sense of self ( $\alpha = 0.78$ )”, with higher scores indicating greater loss of self-concept.

***Unwanted Pursuit.*** Participants completed a 25-item 3-point scale (1 = *never*, 3 = *more than once*; Davis et al., 2000) about acts of unwanted pursuit behavior enacted concerning their most recent breakup. Example items include “Showed up at all of the places that s/he tended to go” and “Threatened to hurt myself if s/he did not return to me” ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

## **Results and Discussion**

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are reported in Table 3. We used multiple regression analyses in SPSS to test for 1) main effect of BPD score, and 2) any two-way interactions between centered BPD traits and gender on the post-breakup variables of positive emotions, negative emotions, breakup distress, desire for reunification, self-concept clarity, as well as unwanted pursuit. Again, there were no significant two-way interactions between gender and BPD on these variables (see Table 4), so we report only the main effects of BPD on dissolution strategies (controlling for FFM traits).

Consistent with hypotheses, there was a significant main effect between BPD traits and relationship dissolution outcomes. Specifically, BPD traits significantly predicted negative emotions toward ex-partner, desire for reunification, loss of self, and unwanted pursuit even when controlling for FFM personality traits. However, there were no significant associations between BPD traits and positive emotions toward ex-partner or breakup distress.

Neuroticism was associated with greater unwanted pursuit, whereas openness and conscientiousness were associated with less breakup distress. Thus, FFM traits did not demonstrate a similarly broad pattern of relations with dissolution outcomes as demonstrated and found for BPD traits. Importantly, all significant associations remained when controlling for length of time from breakup to study completion, with the exception of desire for reunification.

### **General Discussion**

BPD traits are consistently associated with romantic relationship dysfunction, yet empirical research is limited on how these traits affect the relationship dissolution process. The purpose of the current research was to determine the romantic relationship dissolution strategies employed by individuals with BPD traits as well as post-breakup outcomes.

Findings from Study 1 indicated that BPD traits were positively associated with all seven relationship dissolution strategies. The emotion dysregulation, impulsivity, and affective instability characteristic of borderline personality pathology may help to explain these findings (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Trull et al., 2008). One possibility is that people with elevated BPD traits might handle relationship dissolution in a disorganized manner, using contradictory strategies depending on the context. Given the heterogeneity of traits characteristic of individuals with elevated BPD traits, it is also possible that a chosen dissolution strategy will vary based on current affective state. An individual experiencing intense anger and devaluation of a partner will likely choose a different strategy than one who is experiencing a fear of abandonment and a desire for the possibility of reconciliation. Additionally, as individuals with higher levels of BPD traits tend to have a greater number of relationships (Navarro-Gómez et al., 2017; Lazarus et al., 2019), it is possible that they employ different breakup strategies depending on their partner. In addition, it may be important to underline that *any person* may not be conscious about the strategies they engage



in - and their behaviors may reflect inconsistent wants and desires. Future research could examine whether self-reported dissolution strategies corroborate with those reported by friends or ex-partners.

Findings from Study 2 showed that BPD traits were on the whole, positively associated with maladaptive post breakup variables, such as greater negative emotions towards ex-partner, greater loss of self-concept (i.e., lower self-concept clarity), higher desire for reunification, and unwanted pursuit. These findings might reflect the bias towards negative appraisals that individuals with elevated BPD traits experience and likely bring into their relationships (Bhatia et al., 2013). It is possible that individuals with BPD traits interpret their breakups more negatively, and this cognitive bias might consequently result in greater negative emotions towards their ex-partner. Moreover, these negative appraisals might also lower their trust in their ex-partner (Miano et al., 2017), as well as elicit more rumination and obsessive thoughts about their ex-partner (Davis et al., 2000), just like anxiously attached individuals. Importantly, the nature of the items toward ex-partners measured hate and contempt, but other nuances were not tested in the current study (e.g., disappointment, sadness etc.). While a desire for reunification is seemingly contradictory to increased hate and contempt towards an ex-partner, individuals high in BPD traits might oscillate between idealization and devaluation after a break-up as well. Thus, the use of positive tone/self-blame and de-escalation strategies as shown in Study 1, might serve the function of avoiding abandonment and increasing the chances of reunification following an argument or breakup, which is consistent with findings that individuals with more BPD pathology reported higher desire for reunification following a breakup as shown in Study 2. The experiences of rumination and desire for reunification might explain the unwanted pursuit of ex-partners observed in this study.

Interestingly, however, even though BPD traits were associated with maladaptive behaviors post breakup, they were not associated with breakup distress as hypothesized. These results highlight the complex nature of BPD pathology, suggesting that while BPD traits are associated with more intense emotional and behavioral reactions in response to relationship threat (Mikulincer et al., 2003), they also seem to be associated with emotional detachment, especially post break-up (Smith & South, 2020). Hence, these two effects might have cancelled each other out, resulting in the non-significant association with breakup distress. Nonetheless, our results in Study 2 lend further credence that individuals with elevated BPD pathology tend to show vacillation between strategies that are aimed at reestablishing connection or distancing themselves from their ex-partners, albeit often in maladaptive ways (Meyer & Pilkonis, 2005).

### *Limitations*

Our study contained demographically diverse samples in terms of age and ethnicity since we used Mturk samples as compared to college samples, but is not without limitations. Firstly, the study relied on self-reported data, which is limited by biases of self-perception, particularly in individuals with PD pathology (Oltmanns & Turkheimer, 2009). We did not have a sampling strategy to ensure the range of BPD symptoms, but approximately 75% (Study 1 = 87%; Study 2 = 78%) of our participants reported at least one BPD symptom and approximately 15% of our participants (Study 1 = 25%; Study 2 = 12%) reported five or more symptoms. Hence, it is also unclear whether effects would be stronger in a clinical sample.<sup>1</sup> Second, it is common for individuals with BPD traits to have been in multiple relationships (Navarro-Gómez et al., 2017; Lazarus et al., 2019), and they may have employed different breakup strategies when terminating their romantic relationship with different partners. Participants in Study 1 did not report on the number of relationships they previously had, and hence we could not ascertain if number of relationships was associated

with scores on breakup strategies. Furthermore, given that the questions in Study 1 were not specific to a particular partner, participants may have recalled the all the various breakup strategies they have ever used on their former partners. In other words, having multiple partners may result in multiple breakup strategies employed, and this could be a possible explanation as to why a moderate positive correlation was found between BPD traits and the seven relationship dissolution strategies. However, we circumvented this limitation in Study 2, when we asked specifically about their most recent breakup. Finally, the use of multi-item measures for breakup distress and reunification could ensure greater reliability and validity instead of the 1 and 2-item measures utilized in the current study.

#### *Future Directions*

One future direction would be to examine whether the quality and duration of former romantic relationships moderates the effect of elevated BPD traits on relationship dissolution strategies as well as relationship dissolution outcomes. On the one hand, it is possible that higher quality and longer duration of former relationships could ameliorate the effects of BPD traits on our outcome measures, as higher levels of interdependence between partners prior to breakup might lead to continued friendship (Tan et al., 2015). On the other hand, it is also possible that higher quality and longer duration of former relationships might exacerbate the effects of BPD traits on these outcomes due to the emotional intensity of the break-up of a long-term romantic relationship and the potential lack of coping skills to handle this distress.

Future research could also examine if one's (former) partners play a role in the relationship dissolution strategy chosen. As individuals with BPD have a greater number of relationships (Navarro-Gómez et al., 2017; Lazarus et al., 2019) and tend to break up and get back together with their partners (Bouchard et al., 2009), it would be interesting to study if the relationship dissolution strategy chosen remains consistent or whether it is influenced by their (former) partner. For example, relationships characterized by high levels of aggression

might result in the use of a cost escalation strategy as compared to de-escalation. Beyond examining the nature of the relationship, we could also examine both partners of the dyad. It is possible that whether or not a partner has PD symptoms could have additional influence on the relationship dissolution strategy chosen. This would give us further confidence as to how BPD impacts both members of the couple as well as address other questions such as homophily when examining the relationship dissolution strategies or post breakup distress that arise as a function of the partner's characteristics.

Finally, future research could examine with greater detail the manner in which partners interact after breakup. Even though we found that individuals with BPD had a higher desire for reuniting with their ex-partner, we did not examine the degree to which they remained in contact with their ex-partner. For example, individuals with BPD might remain friends with their ex-partners (Tan et al., 2015), which might facilitate the restarting of a romantic relationship between two ex-partners. Hence, subsequent research might take a prospective approach such as utilizing diary designs or longitudinal designs to address the nature of post breakup interactions to a more detailed extent. For example, diary studies might capture oscillations in emotions about a break-up and an ex-partner and highlight which coping strategies are employed. This could shed light on how well individuals with BPD recover following breakup.

### *Summary*

Despite these limitations, our study is the first to examine associations between BPD traits and the romantic relationship dissolution process, both in terms of dissolution strategies enacted as well as distress and behavior post breakup. This study provides some insight as to how maladaptive interpersonal processes observed in the relationships of individuals with BPD relate to romantic relationship dissolution processes and post breakup distress and recovery. In conclusion, the findings of the current study underscore the importance of

focusing on individual differences, particularly maladaptive personality traits, in the relationship dissolution process.

## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that there might be overlap between interpersonal symptoms on the PDQ-4 and our outcome variables. We removed the items of interpersonal symptoms (“I’ll go to extremes to prevent those who I love from ever leaving me”; “I either love someone or hate them, with nothing in between”) from the BPD score, and no patterns of association changed with the use of this revised score (controlling for FFM traits), with the exception of loss of self-concept, which became non-significant.

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Table 1

*Descriptive statistics and pearson correlations between BPD traits and relationship dissolution strategies—Study 1*

Factor	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. BPD	3.76	2.54	1							
2. Open confrontation	4.62	1.58	.32**	1						
3. Cost escalation	3.66	1.84	.58**	.40**	1					
4. Manipulation	3.38	1.90	.61**	.42**	.86**	1				
5. De-escalation	3.73	1.75	.58**	.54**	.77**	.82**	1			
6. Positive tone/self-blame	4.60	1.33	.34**	.73**	.46**	.43**	.54**	1		
7. Avoidance/withdrawal	4.17	1.66	.41**	.53**	.60**	.62**	.67**	.56**	1	
8. Distant/ mediated communication	3.30	1.75	.60**	.35**	.76**	.86**	.78**	.40**	.63**	1

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$  BPD=borderline personality disorder score from the PDQ-IV scale.

Table 2. *Regression Coefficients Associated with Relationship Dissolution Strategies—Study 1*

Outcome	B	CI	p
<b>Open Confrontation</b>			
BPD	.17	.08, .27	.001
Openness	.25	-.11, .60	.17
Conscientiousness	.19	-.13, .51	.24
Extraversion	.16	-.19, .52	.37
Agreeableness	-.35	-.69, -.02	.04
Neuroticism	-.02	-.28, .24	.86
<b>Cost Escalation</b>			
BPD	.37	.28, .46	.001
Openness	.18	-.17, .53	.31
Conscientiousness	.36	.05, .67	.02
Extraversion	-.32	-.66, .03	.07
Agreeableness	.22	-.11, .55	.19
Neuroticism	-.16	-.41, .10	.22
<b>Manipulation</b>			
BPD	.36	.27, .45	.001
Openness	.36	.03, .68	.04
Conscientiousness	.61	.32, .90	.001
Extraversion	-.61	-.94, -.28	.001
Agreeableness	.19	-.12, .50	.23
Neuroticism	-.24	-.48, .001	.05
<b>De-escalation</b>			
BPD	.32	.23, .40	.001
Openness	.02	-.31, .36	.89
Conscientiousness	.51	.21, .81	.001
Extraversion	-.17	-.51, .16	.31
Agreeableness	.09	-.23, .40	.59



Neuroticism	-.14	-.38, .10	.25
<b>Positive tone/self-blame</b>			
BPD	.18	.10, .26	.001
Openness	.07	-.23, .37	.65
Conscientiousness	.11	-.16, .38	.41
Extraversion	.08	-.22, .38	.62
Agreeableness	-.19	-.47, .10	.19
Neuroticism	.04	-.18, .25	.75
<b>Avoidance/withdrawal</b>			
BPD	.24	.15, .33	.001
Openness	.24	-.11, .60	.17
Conscientiousness	.29	-.02, .61	.07
Extraversion	-.39	-.74, -.03	.03
Agreeableness	.25	-.09, .58	.15
Neuroticism	-.09	-.35, .16	.48
<b>Distant-mediated communication</b>			
BPD	.37	.28, .47	.001
Openness	.36	.01, .71	.04
Conscientiousness	.66	.35, .98	.001
Extraversion	-.56	-.91, -.21	.002
Agreeableness	.19	-.14, .52	.25
Neuroticism	-.26	-.51, -.01	.04

*Note.* BPD=borderline personality disorder score from the PDQ-IV scale.

Table 3

*Descriptive statistics and pearson correlations between BPD traits and post-breakup outcomes—Study 2*

Factor	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. BPD	2.22	2.18	1						
2. Negative Emotions	2.89	2.39	.33**	1					
3. Positive Emotions	3.30	2.35	.01	-.04	1				
4. Reunification Desire	2.62	2.82	.25**	.12	.57**	1			
5. Breakup Distress	3.48	1.22	.11	.23**	-.07	.001	1		
6. Loss of Self	1.13	0.27	.26**	.21**	.12	.23**	.05	1	
7. Unwanted Pursuit	3.36	1.17	.47**	.38**	.16	.34**	.09	.25**	1

*Note.* \*\*  $p < .01$ . BPD=borderline personality disorder score from the PDQ-IV scale.

Table 4. *Regression Coefficients Associated with Relationship Dissolution Outcomes—Study 2*

Outcome	B	CI	p
<b>Negative Emotions</b>			
BPD	.33	.12, .54	.003
Openness	.29	-.23, .81	.27
Conscientiousness	.47	-.15, 1.09	.14
Extraversion	.13	-.45, .70	.66
Agreeableness	.35	-.28, .97	.28
Neuroticism	.38	-.24, 1.00	.23
<b>Positive Emotions</b>			
BPD	.05	-.18, .28	.66
Openness	.23	-.32, .78	.41
Conscientiousness	.19	-.47, .86	.56
Extraversion	-.15	-.76, .46	.63
Agreeableness	.01	-.65, .68	.97
Neuroticism	.19	-.48, .85	.58
<b>Reunification Desire</b>			
BPD	.37	.10, .63	.007
Openness	.11	-.53, .75	.72
Conscientiousness	.07	-.70, .84	.85
Extraversion	.02	-.69, .73	.96
Agreeableness	.24	-.54, 1.01	.54
Neuroticism	.44	-.33, 1.22	.26
<b>Breakup Distress</b>			
BPD	.06	-.05, .18	.29
Openness	-.31	-.59, -.04	.02
Conscientiousness	.34	.01, .67	.04
Extraversion	.26	-.04, .56	.10
Agreeableness	-.32	-.64, .01	.06

Neuroticism	.31	-.02, .64	.06
<b>Loss of Self</b>			
BPD	.14	.03, .25	.02
Openness	.15	-.13, .42	.30
Conscientiousness	-.08	-.41, .25	.65
Extraversion	.25	-.06, .55	.11
Agreeableness	.08	-.25, .41	.63
Neuroticism	-.10	-.43, .23	.55
<b>Unwanted Pursuit</b>			
BPD	.07	.05, .09	.001
Openness	.03	-.02, .09	.26
Conscientiousness	.02	-.05, .09	.52
Extraversion	.02	-.04, .09	.49
Agreeableness	.05	-.02, .12	.14
Neuroticism	.09	.02, .16	.01

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*Note.* BPD=borderline personality disorder score from the PDQ-IV scale.