Disentangling Emotion Processes in Borderline Personality Disorder: Physiological and Self-Reported Assessment of Biological Vulnerability, Baseline Intensity, and Reactivity to Emotionally Evocative Stimuli

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Abstract: This study investigated M. Linehan's (1993) theory that individuals meeting criteria for borderline personality disorder (BPD) have high biological vulnerability to emotion dysregulation, including high baseline emotional intensity and high reactivity to emotionally evocative stimuli. Twenty individuals with BPD, 20 age-matched individuals with generalized social anxiety disorder (SAD), and 20 age-matched normal controls (NCs) participated in 2 separate emotion induction conditions, a standardized condition, and a personally relevant condition. Respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), skin conductance response (SCR), and self-report measures were collected throughout the experiment. BPD participants displayed heightened biological vulnerability compared with NCs as indicated by reduced basal RSA. BPD participants also exhibited high baseline emotional intensity, characterized by heightened SCR and heightened self-reported negative emotions at baseline. However, the BPD group did not display heightened reactivity, as their physiological and self-reported changes from baseline to the emotion inductions tasks were not greater than the other 2 groups. © 2009 American Psychological Association.

Author Keywords: borderline personality disorder; emotion regulation; psychophysiology; reactivity; vulnerability

Year: 2009
Source title: Journal of Abnormal Psychology
Volume: 118
Issue: 3
Page: 531-544
Cited by: 15
Link: Scopus Link
Document Type: Article
Source: Scopus

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