

The Hidden Patterns of BPD and NPD: A Deep Dive into Attachment and Interpersonal Dysfunction

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Abstract

This is a single-couple idiographic case study of the borderline/narcissistic type of relationships. Utilizing an integrated assessment approach that entailed the use of the Sacks Sentence Completion Test (SSCT) and the International Personality Disorder Examination (IPDE). The dyad was chosen purposely to investigate interpersonal complementarity in an intimate relationship. The borderline partner showed the abandonment-seeking patterns, which are manifested by the high SSCT relational conflict indices ($M = 1.7$), and the narcissistic partner showed the grandiosity-mediated withdrawal ($M = 1.2$). Thematic analysis brought out intertwining developmental formations typified by maternal deprivation and paternal wounding which helped create a sense of defensive complementarity in the dyad. The inter-coder reliability before consensus showed high agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = .82$). The results shed light on the dyadic processes of personality pathology but are ideographically constrained and non-generalizable because the study was limited to a single couple. SSCT narratives were relational and attachment richer than those derived using structured diagnostics alone, which highlights that the combination of projective and diagnostic methods in personality assessment is indeed clinically valuable. Diverse dyadic constellation replication is justified.

Keywords: Couple case study, Personality disorder, Borderline personality disorder, Narcissistic personality disorder, Sacks Sentence Completion Test, Personality assessment

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Introduction:

The creation of personality, especially the role of interpersonal experiences through attachment relationships in the development of personality disorders, was adequately explained in the introduction. It supports Sullivan (1953) and Bowlby's (1973) arguments regarding the role of the earliest attachments in developing constructs that guide later relationships. The attention turns now to the BPD and NPD intersection and the paradox of their relationship, which stands in stark opposition to each other yet is fundamentally connected. These relationships can form persistent, self-reinforcing cycles that drive the progression of the disorders.

It can be a critical question for all the clinicians to address this relationship with BPD and NPD, where what enables these personalities to come together to form a union? What keeps them connected to each other? Despite do many differences they establish a bond which perpetuates unfulfilled desires and unresolved childhood fantasies through repetitive behaviour patterns. Basically, critical factors from BPD like overwhelming and volatile relationships, deep emptiness, acute rage, abandonment anxiety, solitary aversion, and a

poorly integrated identity are assumed to stem from some kind of attachment system failure (Gill & Warburton, 2014). As per Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) the diagnostic criteria also state similar symptoms which includes pervasive pattern marked by emotional dysregulation, instability in interpersonal relationships and self-image. The disorder is diagnosable only if five of the following symptoms are met: frantic efforts to avoid abandonment, unstable relationships marked by extremes of idealization and devaluation, identity disturbances, impulsivity, recurrent self-harm, mood instability, feelings of emptiness, intense anger, and transient paranoid ideation or dissociation. Marcia Linehan states that unstable feelings are fuelled by dysregulating parental response resulting in lack of trust in one's emotions and ineffective communication. Altogether this perpetuates emotional vulnerability eventually fosters emotional dysregulation (Gill & Warburton, 2014; Crowell et al., 2009). Similarly, traits of narcissism may arise from a fragile self-concept and relationships with uninvolved parents forming a dysfunctional self-image and impair the ability to relate to others in a healthy way

(Kohut & Wolf, 1978). NPD is defined by enduring patterns of grandiose self-importance, a disproportionate need for praise, and absence of empathy. People diagnosed with NPD often show self-importance and are preoccupied with fantasies of success, power, and lack of empathy to other people (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). If we closely study both, it can be observed that there is chronic difficulty with separation-individuation and insecurity leading to similar psychopathology patterns (Mahlar, 1986, pp. 222–232).

All these facets can be well explored using projective assessments like the Sacks Sentence Completion Test Sacks & Levy (1960) that inform self-concept, family dynamics and social relationships.

Rationale for SSCT:

The SSCT has been used in research studies that have mostly focused on the individual diagnostic formulation and the analysis of internal conflict. The possible ability of the instrument to measure reciprocity of the relational processes in personality-disordered couples has not been given much scholarly consideration. Therefore, the proposed study will be focusing on exploring mental health issues in Borderline personality disorder and Narcissistic personality disorder leading to interpersonal dysfunction. The rationale for utilising the Sacks Sentence Completion Test Sacks & Levy (1960) as a projective instrument is articulated with clarity, emphasising the significance of 'spontaneous' responses that provide profound insight into an individual's authentic emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. In this respect, the projective character of the SSCT is designed to gain entry to covert or less defensive aspects of personality and emotional response.

Aim: This research investigates the applicability and effectiveness of Sacks Sentence Completion Test (SSCT) in identifying key clinical markers for diagnosing couples where one partner has borderline personality disorder and the other narcissistic personality disorder.

Methods:

The research design and the context of the relationship will be outlined below. This study took the case study approach as a single-couple design (N = 2) in which it delved into the psychological interaction of borderline and narcissistic personality organization in an

intimate dyad. The design favoured the couple as a living relational system in preference to fragmenting pathology into separate silos and where defenses are interwoven, projections bounced about and attachments wounds played out in real time. This method was appropriate to the exploratory purpose: to lighten up the phenomenon of Cluster B structures, not as solitary entities, but as one another provoking and complementing. The realistic couple setting, characterized by a high degree of volatility, pursuit-withdrawal, and emotional interdependence provided a graphic stage of projective revelation, reminiscent of psychodynamic culture of investigating personality in the field.

Rationale: The idiographic depth and nomothetic breadth of single-couple methodology is more appropriate to reveal the unknown relational processes that the larger-N designs fail to capture (Yin, 2018). Timing Cross-sectional recorded dynamics at the point in time; longitudinal replication required.

Participants:

The participants and case vignettes are provided. The sample included a heterosexual couple in Jaipur, India of 2 years of intimate relationship with a referral of relational distress in the presence of the suspected personality pathology. The criteria of purposive selection included: (a) unremitting dyadic dysfunction, (b) clinical suspicion of Cluster B characteristics, (c) mutual agreement to assessment, and (d) the lack of psychosis/cognitive impairment.

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) Case-

Ms. H T. 30, Educated up to bachelors hailing from Jaipur, belonging to higher middle socio-economic status, presented with the complaints of irritability, frequent anger outbursts- since 6 months, one episode of self-harm, cutting self- One year back, has threatened the boyfriend that she will commit suicide multiple times, Family History- Interpersonal issues with parents, continuous arguments with father, Frequent fights with boyfriend, feels that he will leave her, temperamentally was slow to warm up.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) Case-

Mr, P S 36, hailing from Jaipur, educated up to masters in technology, belonging to higher middle socio economic status, presented with

the complaints that he is being manipulated by his girlfriend, disturbed sleep, wants to improve his interpersonal functioning, feels that he is not respected and understood by others, Interpersonal issues with parents, father would taunt him that he is good for nothing, constant name calling was present, Occupational History- Thinks that his boss is narcissistic but good in his work, feels that his colleagues are jealous of him, Frequent fights with girlfriend, feels that she makes him feel confused, temperamentally slow to warm up.

Assessment Tools and Procedures

Written informed consent was obtained assuring their understanding of the research by explaining them that they can withdraw from the study any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized ensuring ethical integrity. Rapport was established with the couple, demographic details were undertaken, and case history was elicited. IPDE and SSCT were administered respectively.

1. **Demographic sheet:** Identifying data including age sex, gender, relationship duration was attained.

2. **International Personality Disorder Examination (IPDE; (Loranger et al., 1999)**

To explore the personality disorder traits and its intensity. This is a This semi-structured interview helped confirm the diagnosis of BPD and NPD in each participant based on the diagnostic criteria outlined in the DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022).

The female participant demonstrated clinically significant borderline personality organization (IPDE = 14) and Male participant depicted 18 in narcissistic personality organization, diagnostic interview. The personality diagnostic evaluation is suggestive of borderline personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder.

3. **Sacks Sentence Completion Test (SSCT; (Sack & Levy,1960)**

Both participants were given the Sacks Sentence Completion Test that comprised of 60 incomplete sentence stems. They were asked to fill in every sentence with the first thought that comes into mind. The time spent in administration was about 20-40 minutes on each participant. At the end, an inquiry process was carried out to get elaboration on emotionally salient or

conflict laden responses. The scoring was done in 15 attitudinal areas, which comprised attitudes toward mother, father, family, heterosexual relationships, authority, self-concept, guilt, fears, and goals. Every answer was scored according to the standard conflict scoring: 0 = No conflict / adaptive response, 1 = Mild conflict and 2 = Severe conflict / pathological indicators.

Comparison was done on the convergences and divergences in attachment patterns, interpersonal schemas, and defensive processes in the BPD and NPD participants.

Thematic Analysis:

Projective themes based on SSCT were cross mapped on IPDE diagnostics indicators and developmental cases histories narratives to discover convergent and divergent relational constructs. An interpretation of SSCT stories was done using a phenomenological-thematic approach. The transcription of responses was made word-to-word, repeatedly read and transcribed, and open-coded line-by-line, to determine latent themes (e.g., abandonment, grandiosity, shame). SSCT domains were mapped to codes and divided into psychodynamic motives and dyadically grouped to analyse relational cycles like projective identification and pursuit-withdrawal patterns. Analytic rigor adhered to the credibility requirements of trustworthiness as presented by Lincoln and Guba. Transcripts were analysed by two independent coders before being discussed ($\kappa = .82$) and then by consensus. Triangulation with IPDE results and case histories was used to enhance credibility, as well as structured coding and NVivo audit trails were used to support dependability and confirmability on the idiographic limit.

Ethical considerations: Subject experts in clinical psychology and personality assessment reviewed and approved the research protocol. The whole process was carried out in compliance with the accepted ethical norms and was based on the principles presented in the Declaration of Helsinki on the research work with human subjects.

Results:

Projective Narratives and Dyadic Personality Dynamics

The partner with borderline personality organization demonstrated abandonment-driven pursuit ($M = 1.7$), reflected in narratives

of deprivation, dependency, and fear of relational loss, whereas the narcissistic partner exhibited grandiosity-mediated withdrawal ($M = 1.2$), expressed through defensive distancing and self-inflation themes. These patterns emerged through cross-domain thematic convergence and were triangulated with diagnostic and developmental data (See table S1 and S2 Supplementary Files).

In projective material, two psychological worlds were outlined, namely, the affective deprivation and abandonment vulnerability in the borderline profile as compared to criticism, resentment, and defensive self-inflation in the narcissistic one. (See table S3 in supplementary material)

Family and Imprints of Attachment

The greatest intensity of conflict was observed in parental sentence stems, which is consistent with developmental formulations of Cluster B personality organization.

Borderline Profile (Ms. HT)

Maternal Neglect

- “My mother... is the most ‘unmotherly’ person I’ve known.”
- “I like my mother, but... she makes it hard to love her.”

Paternal Ambivalence

- “I feel my father seldom... drinks but when he does, he’s nicer.”
- “If my father would only... seek therapy. He’s a broken man.”

Heterosexual Guilt Conflict

- “The worst thing I ever did... was cheat on my boyfriend, then return wondering what life with the other might’ve been.”

Such narratives depict unfulfilled appeasing needs, relationship insecurity, and moral dilemma in attachment relationships.

Narcissistic Profile (Mr. PS)

Paternal Injury

- “I feel my father seldom... cares about another.”
- “If my father would... stay out of my way.”
- “I wish my father... had left me younger.”

Maternal Disengagement

- “My mother and I don’t get along.”
- “My mother is a puzzle I don’t like to solve.”
- “I like my mother but that’s a lie.”

These estimates imply internalized criticism, emotional distancing and defensive relational disengagement.

Attachment Summary

Borderline organization - pacifying deprivation, abandonment hunger, emotional dependency.

Narcissistic organization - internalization of criticism, autonomy defense, relational detachment.

Borderline Profile

Resilient self-representations emerged:

- “I could be perfectly happy if... I am happy now.”
- “When odds are against me... grit and resilience.”
- “When luck turns... my talents.”

In the past 18 years of age, financial independence strengthened an adaptive self-efficacy layer that overlapped with affective instability.

Narcissistic Profile

Self-descriptions reflected aspirational grandiosity:

- “I always wanted... to save the planet.”
- “Someday... five passports full of stamps.”
- “Secret ambition... world’s ends.”

Achievement fantasies and expansion themes appeared to control self-esteem.

Relational Attitudes

Narcissist projections focused on idealized demands with partners:

- “Perfect woman... equal and complementary.”
- “Sexual relationships... serious partner.”

In comparison, border line relational material indicated the presence of guilt, dependency, and sensitivity to abandonment. Defense mechanisms found be of rationalization and reaction formation which shaped socially desirable and emotionally divisive narratives.

Discussion:

Relational Psychodynamics

The results conceptualize the organization of borderline and narcissistic personality as interconnected relational systems based on attachment rupture. Borderline pursuit had been deprivation-related abandonment anxiety, and narcissistic distancing was criticism-related self-defense.

In spite of these weaknesses, adaptive strengths that included occupational functioning, aspirational striving, and situational relational investment facilitated functioning at an outpatient level in the face of high intrapsychic strain levels.

Defensive Processes in Projective Expression

Latent defensive operations were effectively circumvented by the SSCT bypassing social desirability filters:

Relational guilt concealed through rationalization.

Reaction formation distorting dependency needs.

Grandiosity as a defense to shame.

Vulnerability shielding by emotional minimization.

These defenses are compatible with classical psychodynamic constructions of Cluster B personality structure. Such results correspond with previously known formulations of defensive organization of narcissism, where the regulation of weak self-esteem is maintained by compensatory grandiosity and defensive distortion (Pincus and Lukowitsky, 2010). Also facilitating the access to the latent psychological content that is not under conscious control of impression management (Sacks and Levy, 1960), the projective format of the SSCT made the access to the current evidence in relation to projective and value-based assessment through the lens of borderline and narcissistic personality constellation (Huczewska and Rogoza, 2020).

Dyadic Enactment

In the relational system, pursuit was met by withdrawal and projections re-created the wounds of caregivers, continuing the process of cyclic conflict escalation and emotional misattunement (Sullivan, 1953). Interpretative depth was maximized through diagnostic triangulation with IPDE (BPD = 14; NPD = 18), and these diagnostic triangulations facilitated clinical validity (Loranger et al., 1999; Alberdi-Paramo et al., 2022).

Clinical Implications

Results indicate that integrative, relationally wise interventions that focus on intrapsychic and dyadic processes are worthwhile. The most important areas of treatment can be:

Attachment repair -sensitivity to abandonment and affect regulation (Linehan, 1993; Rady et al., 2021)

Shame regulation - operates via narcissistic wound and weak self-esteem (Kohut and Wolf, 1978)

Dependency negotiation - re-organizing maladaptive pursuit withdrawal dynamics (Lebow & Snyder, 2022)

Defensive restructuring - changes in defensiveness of personality in readings of therapeutic alliances (Tanzilli et al., 2021)

Emerging developments in couple therapy models further highlight the clinical promise of relational interventions for borderline–narcissistic pairings (Lebow & Snyder, 2022).

Idiographic Boundaries

Such results are ideographically located in the single-couple design. Generalization of the findings to personality disorder samples is also restricted by nature and must be replicated in larger dyadic sample studies using multimethod assessment models (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). However, the current case highlights the clinical and theoretical importance of combining projective, diagnostic, and relational analyses in explaining complex personality constructions.

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NOTE: The authors have sole responsibility for the originality of the contents of this manuscript.

Supplementary File 1: SSCT Response Excerpts and Thematic Coding Matrix**Supplementary File 1****SSCT Response Excerpts and Thematic Coding Matrix****Participant Codes**

- **P1:** Borderline Personality Organization
- **P2:** Narcissistic Personality Organization

Table S1**Selected SSCT Responses Supporting Thematic Interpretation**

SSCT Stem	P1 Response (Borderline)	Theme Code	P2 Response (Narcissistic)	Theme Code
My mother...	"The most unmotherly person I've known."	Maternal deprivation	"We don't get along."	Maternal disengagement
I like my mother but...	"She makes it hard to love her."	Attachment ambivalence	"That's a lie."	Emotional distancing
My father...	"He drinks but is nicer then."	Paternal inconsistency	"Stay out of my way."	Paternal injury
I feel my father seldom...	"Understands me."	Emotional neglect	"Cares about another."	Criticism internalization
Relationships...	"I need constant reassurance."	Dependency need	"Must be equal to me."	Idealization demand
The worst thing I did...	"Cheated but feared losing him."	Relational guilt	"Trusted the wrong people."	Superiority defense
I fear...	"Being left alone."	Abandonment anxiety	"Being controlled."	Autonomy defense
I am...	"Too emotional sometimes."	Affective instability	"Better than most."	Grandiosity
Someday I want...	"A stable loving relationship."	Security longing	"Global recognition."	Achievement fantasy

Table S2**Domain-Wise Conflict Scores**

SSCT Domain	P1 Borderline	P2 Narcissistic
Mother	2.0	1.0
Father	1.8	1.6
Family	1.7	1.3
Heterosexual Relationships	1.9	1.2
Authority	1.4	1.5
Self-Concept	1.6	1.4
Guilt	1.8	1.1
Fears	1.9	1.3
Goals	1.2	1.4
Mean Conflict	1.7	1.2

Table S3
Dyadic Thematic Convergence Matrix

Relational Dimension	Borderline Expression	Narcissistic Expression	Dyadic Pattern
Attachment need	Fear of abandonment	Fear of engulfment	Pursuit–withdrawal
Self-regulation	Emotional dysregulation	Grandiosity defense	Complementarity
Parental imprints	Maternal deprivation	Paternal criticism	Injury reenactment
Intimacy stance	Dependency	Distancing	Relational polarity
Conflict repair	Guilt appeasement	Emotional minimization	Escalation cycle