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Borderline Personality Disorder and Empathic Dysfunction - a Systematic Review

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Objective

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) patients struggle with interpersonal relationships. Although this incapacity to understand others' emotions and perspectives is thought to be relevant to these patients' impaired social function, the role of empathic dysfunction in BPD is still a matter of debate.

The aim of this systematic review is to examine the current evidence on differences in empathy dimensions in BPD patients.

Methods

Five databases were searched for studies published between 2000 and 2012, with the keywords: social cognition, empathy, theory of mind AND borderline personality disorder. Inclusion criteria were: BPD diagnoses according to the International Standardized Classification, assessment of empathy and related constructs using validated instruments and presence of a healthy control group.

Results

Fourteen studies were identified which included a total of 463 BPD patients and 420 healthy controls. Seven studies assessed empathy in a bi-dimensional way; five of them reported lower cognitive empathy in BPD patients, but one study reported the opposite trend, and another one showed no differences between BPD and controls. Concerning emotional empathy, reduced levels were observed among BPD patients only in two of the studies. Another group of studies measured emotion recognition ability exclusively, presenting conflicting results: in three of them, BPD patients presented higher scores than controls; in the other three, BPD patients had significantly lower accuracy than controls.

Conclusion

Although evidence about a specific pattern of empathy dysfunction is inconclusive, a trend toward lower levels of (emotional and cognitive) empathy was detected in BPD patients.