

# Is suicidality an outcome or a cause of extreme relationship-seeking in borderline personality disorder?

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## Abstract

Previous theory proposes that humans perceive ordinary objects and experiences as beautiful, which motivates the pursuit of life. This quality is crucial among organisms that are cognitively capable of understanding that they can end their own suffering through self-killing (i.e., suicide). This paper argues that borderline personality disorder (BPD) is characterized by an inability to find beauty in ordinary experiences, which results in increased susceptibility to suicide. Accordingly, individuals with BPD pursue meaningful relationships to supplement this deficiency. Thus, those with BPD are hypothesized to have increased emotional sensitivity to interpersonal contexts, but muted emotional responses to ordinary experiences that elicit awe or happiness in others (e.g., pictures of landscapes, poetry about nature, etc.). Suicidality in individuals with BPD is often precipitated by fear of separation or rejection. At first glance this may appear as a bargaining tactic, designed to rekindle a dying relationship. Alternatively, this paper suggests that a predisposition to suicide is causal of extreme relationship-seeking behaviour in BPD. Additionally, this theory suggests that those with BPD who do not meet the interpersonal criteria for the disorder may be at a heightened risk of suicidality, because they have fewer objects to derive beauty from.

**Keywords:** bargaining model, borderline personality disorder, pain and brain model, suicide, signalling perspective

## Introduction

An organism that experiences the ordinary world as beautiful is motivated to live (Humphrey, 2011, 2018; Soper, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021). However, what if some individuals are incapable of deriving beauty from ordinary experiences? These cases may seek out other objects of beauty to compensate for this deficiency. This paper argues that borderline personality disorder (BPD) is characterized by an inability to find beauty in ordinary experiences, which results in susceptibility to suicide. Individuals with BPD place abnormal importance on interpersonal relationships. These relationships may act as meaningful objects that supplement the inability to find beauty in other experiences. Suicidality in individuals with BPD is often precipitated by fear of separation or rejection (Brodsky et al., 2006; Stanley & Siever, 2010). At first glance this may appear as a bargaining tactic, designed to rekindle a dying relationship (Stengel 1952; Syme et al., 2016; Rosenthal 1993; Wiley 2020). Alternatively, this paper suggests suicidality is a cause of extreme relationship-seeking behaviour in BPD. This theorizing generates the hypothesis that individuals with BPD are unable to derive happiness from ordinary experiences (that would elicit happiness in those without the disorder). Thus, the list of things that can elicit happiness in BPD is expected to be more limited. A similar but more nuanced hypothesis is that those with BPD have increased emotional sensitivity to interpersonal contexts, but muted emotional responses to ordinary experiences that elicit awe or happiness in others. Additionally, those with BPD—but who lack a heightened sensitivity to interpersonal relations—may be at a heightened risk of suicide, because they have fewer objects to turn to when deriving beauty in life. This sets new trajectories for future research in this area.

In its rawest form, the argument made in the present paper is that some people cannot derive meaning-to-live from ordinary experiences, and thus compensate by having an amplified fixation on interpersonal relationships. This mechanism does not necessarily need to be tied to BPD. However, BPD provides the closest representation of the proposed mechanism relative to other psychological conditions; and is thus useful in present discussion when situating the proposed mechanism within current psychological research. Additionally, not all instances of BPD may be representative of the mechanism I am proposing, and this leads to further theorizing and caveating (presented throughout later sections of the paper). Furthermore, BPD is not necessarily a valid phenomenon, and is only rendered reliably measurable by fixed diagnostic criteria (a point argued for other psychological conditions by Soper [2017, 2021] and Syme & Hagen [2019a]). I hope that speculation on underlying mechanisms might parse BPD into distinct phenomena with better-defined underlying causes; or help group it with other disorders that could be explained by a unified mechanism (e.g., Soper's [2017, 2019, 2021] concept of *common mental disorder*).

The present paper uses some loose terms that require clarified definitions. The word "beauty" and its meanings are contentious in philosophy (Van der Berg, 2019). Solely for the purposes of the present paper, I define beauty as something that produces emotional change that the experiencer subjectively values or perceives as a cause of awe or interest. Thus, beauty facilitates subjective wellbeing in the experiencer (i.e., happiness), whether immediate or derived indirectly through a delay. Other emotions may be elicited during this process (e.g., sadness transmuted later into subjective value, feeling both happy and sad), but these would be by-products unrequired for beauty to occur. Similarly, I define "meaningful" as anything that is subjectively valued by the experiencer. I believe these definitions are broad enough to suit my purposes.

### **Vibrancy of life as anti-suicide adaptation**

Humphrey (2011) proposes that humans perceive ordinary experiences as beautiful, which in turn motivates them to pursue life over death. Humphrey (2011) notes that humans find beauty in seemingly purposeless things (e.g., the sound of leaves rustling through trees, landscapes, feeling the wind on our face). This ability to find beauty in essentially nothing prompts the human mind to have a naturally positive outlook on life. As an example, Humphrey (2018) points to the following quote, cited as an argument against killing oneself in *Lavengro* (by George Borrow, 1900):

"There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise the wind on the heath."

Humphrey (2018) highlights how scientifically peculiar it is that this resonates with us—that ordinary experiences (e.g., "sun, moon, and stars") can be used as an argument against killing oneself. He suggests that this trait of projecting beauty onto ordinary objects motivates humans to preserve life over death (Humphrey, 2011, 2018).

In his later publication, Humphrey (2018) extends his theorizing in a way that overlaps heavily with previous work from Soper (2017). Notably, both authors use Humphrey's (2011) earlier assertions as a starting point for these similar lines of thought. Soper (2017, 2018, 2019, 2021) and Humphrey (2018) suggest humans uniquely require that life is perceived as beautiful because we are prone to suicidality—a by-product of two highly adaptive traits:

- First, pain is an adaptation that motivates an organism to escape harm or death. Likewise psychological pain motivates one to escape detrimental personal or interpersonal contexts (Nesse, 1999, 2019; Soper 2017, 2018, 2019).
- Second, the human brain provides a high-level of intelligence not observed in other organisms, permitting us to transcend most natural dangers through technology and

culture (e.g., use of medicine to cure illness). However, these two adaptations taken together—*pain* and *brain*—make humans cognitively reflexive enough to understand that they can end their own suffering through self-killing (Soper; 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021).

Thus, the human condition is one that is naturally prone to suicide. In turn, Soper (2017, 2018, 2019) suggests that humans—instead of receding in *intelligence* or *susceptibility to pain*—have developed anti-suicide adaptations. For example, the lethargy that accompanies depression may be designed to inhibit suicidal action, which requires physical effort to execute. Additionally, drug-use may be a learned method of dispelling dysphoria, thus inhibiting suicidality. Also, the human quality of perceiving beauty in ordinary life prompts us to resist suicide, despite encountered difficulties. The present paper aims to extend this theory of Soper's (2017, 2018, 2019, 2021) to BPD.

### **Relationship-seeking in BPD as an outcome of suicidality**

Consider the following diagnostic criteria for BPD, from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Five out of nine of the below criteria are required to meet a diagnosis of BPD:

1. Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment. Note: Do not include suicidal or self-mutilating behavior covered in Criterion 5.
2. A pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation.
3. Identity disturbance: markedly and persistently unstable self image or sense of self.
4. Impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging (e.g., spending, sex, substance abuse, reckless driving, binge eating). Note: Do not include suicidal or self-mutilating behavior covered in Criterion 5.
5. Recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats, or self-mutilating behavior.
6. Affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood (e.g., intense episodic dysphoria, irritability, or anxiety usually lasting a few hours and only rarely more than a few days).
7. Chronic feelings of emptiness.
8. Inappropriate, intense anger or difficulty controlling anger (e.g., frequent displays of temper, constant anger, recurrent physical fights).
9. Transient, stress-related paranoid ideation or severe dissociative symptoms.

Notably, five out of nine of these items indicate either (a) a persistent dissatisfaction with life (i.e. items 5, 6, 7) or (b) an amplified interest in interpersonal relations (i.e., items 1, 2). Here, I assume that an individual experiencing (a) extreme emptiness, affective instability, suicidality, or (b) extreme fixation on interpersonal relations struggles to derive meaning-to-live from ordinary things like "sun, moon, and stars". Therefore, no matter how BPD manifests, at least one component will relate to a heightened need to pursue fulfillment from sources that extend beyond ordinary experiences. This would suggest a reduced capacity for deriving meaning from said ordinary experiences. Under Soper's (2017, 2018, 2019, 2021) and Humphrey's (2011, 2018) theories this suggests an increased susceptibility to suicide—because the ability to perceive the ordinary as beautiful is what prompts humans to pursue life, despite knowing that they can end their own suffering through self-killing.

Perhaps BPD can be characterized as a deficiency in the ability to find beauty in the ordinary. If individuals cannot find beauty in ordinary experiences, they are less motivated to pursue life, and thus endure an amplified proneness to suicide. Such an individual may try to supplement said emptiness with something else. If individuals lack the ability to find beauty in arbitrary experiences, then they may require an adaptation that prompts them to seek reasons

to live. I propose that—for BPD—the object that makes life worth living manifests as interpersonal relationships. And this is what prompts such an intense focus on interpersonal relations in this personality disorder. Thus, extreme relationship-seeking behavior in BPD may be an outcome of a proneness to suicide. Naturally, this may only apply to a stricter definition BPD, wherein interpersonal difficulties are salient. However, an interesting inference can be made here—those who meet the diagnostic criteria for BPD but fail to meet the interpersonal components (i.e., items 1, 2) may be at heightened risk of suicide, because they have even fewer options for deriving beauty from living. This would be an interesting hypothesis to pursue in future research.

Noted above, Soper suggests drug-use is a culturally transmitted method of contending with suicidality. Interestingly, BPD is also highly comorbid with substance use disorder (defined by drug abuse, addiction, etc.; Trull et al., 2018). This hints at an inability in BPD to derive happiness from easily available alternatives. However, drug-use is different from relationship-seeking, which the arguments in this paper are centred around. This suggests that there may be other counters-to-dysphoria that individuals with BPD have access to. Some of these, like drug-use, may be universal dysphoria-counters that are tapped into by more than just those with BPD. Hence, there is imperfect overlap between BPD and substance use disorder. While the present paper focuses on the relationship-seeking component of BPD, it is noteworthy that not all those with BPD may use relationship-seeking as their dysphoria-counter. There are likely others that need exploring.

### **Hypothesis generation and favourable evidence**

The primary hypothesis generated from this theory is that those with BPD would find happiness in different or more restricted things than others. Thus, what elicits happiness in individuals with BPD would be characteristically different from what elicits happiness in those without the disorder. The alternative hypothesis here is that those with BPD still achieve a degree of happiness from the same things as controls, but their resting-level happiness is severely lower. The present paper proposes differences in *what* elicits happiness in BPD relative to controls. With slightly more nuance, the same things might elicit happiness between those with and without BPD, but to different degrees. For example, those with BPD may have an amplified emotional sensitivity to interpersonal relationships, but muted emotional sensitivity to ordinary experiences that others perceive as beautiful (e.g., pictures of landscapes, poetry about nature, etc.).

To date, I could find little research focused on *what* made individuals with BPD happy. There are some studies suggesting BPD is accompanied by *less* happiness relative to those without the disorder (e.g., Dammann et al., 2011; Yu & Clark, 2015)—but very few get at the qualitative nature of *what* provokes happiness in this personality disorder.

Dammann et al. (2011) contrasted the self-image and perception-of-others in individuals with BPD to those with major depressive disorder (qualitative study; 12 participants per condition). They note that individuals with BPD see themselves as friendly and helpful, whereas others are portrayed as selfish, malicious, and content. This last characteristic is interesting, possibly suggesting those with BPD recognize that others are happier than them. Perhaps this is because others derive happiness and meaning from ordinary objects and experiences, whereas individuals with BPD lack this capability. This study provides some soft evidence in the expected direction, but does not directly confirm the stated hypothesis.

A study from De Panfilis et al. (2015) exposed individuals with (and without) BPD to three experimental conditions: either being excluded from a group, being included, or being over-included. This study used a “cyberball” paradigm, wherein participants were asked to exchange ball-throws with two other players in a video game environment. These two other players were confederates, and either excluded the participant from the game, passed to them one-third of the time (i.e., included), or passed to them 45% of the time (i.e., over-included). Individuals with BPD reported higher levels of negative emotion relative to controls in the excluded and included

conditions, but not in the over-included condition. Additionally, only the over-included condition resulted in individuals with BPD experiencing fewer negative emotions relative to the excluded condition. This study suggests that those with BPD have an amplified sensitivity to interpersonal relations, and are emotionally motivated to pursue over-inclusion. This study suggests a difference in the degree to which social relationships are weighted in importance between individuals with and without BPD. Thus, this provides mild evidence in favour of the stated hypothesis. However, there are still many angles from which this question could be approached empirically. More studies looking at the same concept in different ways would validate the robustness of this finding and its relevance to the stated hypothesis. Additionally, more work is needed to look at whether individuals with BPD have more muted emotional responses to ordinary objects that are perceived as beautiful by others (e.g., artistic depictions of ordinary life, prose describing nature, etc.).

### **Reverse causality: Suicidality as an outcome of relationship-seeking in BPD**

An alternative perspective to the one above can be found through the signalling perspective of suicide. The signalling perspective broadly states that suicide attempts represent an honest cry for help in desperate situations, with death seldomly occurring as an unfortunate outcome. If suicide attempters can convince family and friends that they sincerely desire death over their current life situation, then those family and friends may be motivated to change the attempters' life situations for the better. A sympathetic example cited by Syme et al. (2016) is that of a young woman forced into a pre-arranged marriage, who (a) attempts suicide repeatedly until (b) her family agrees to call off the arrangement (Pospisil, 1958). Desperation and powerlessness in interpersonal relationships are key ingredients of the signalling perspective: if one has an alternative to attempting suicide, then that alternative is likely more adaptive. Using randomly sampled ethnographic studies on cultures from across the world, Syme et al. (2016) found evidence in favour of the signalling perspective. There is additionally some variation in opinion from signalling perspective theorists. The model put forward by Syme et al. (2016) states that suicide is not adaptive—rather, the suicide *attempt* is the adaptive behaviour, it being risky but potentially conveying sincerity and thus having worthwhile payoffs. As an addition, Wiley (2020) argues that suicide itself could boost the perceived sincerity of less-risky suicidal behaviour from others. For example, if suicide is extremely common in a society, one may only have to threaten (as opposed to attempt) suicide to receive sympathy. For sake of clarity, one can refer to the specific theory specified by Syme et al. (2016; Syme & Hagen, 2019b) as the *bargaining model* of suicide. The term *signalling perspective* will encompass any broad discussion wherein suicidality is suggested to be communicative behavior (e.g., Stengel, 1952; Rosenthal, 1993; Wiley, 2020).

From the signalling perspective, I might assume that suicidality expressed within BPD is a bargaining tactic designed to rekindle dying relationships. Individuals with BPD have an amplified sensitivity to loss of relationships, resulting in suicidal behaviour being used outside of contexts where it would be expected. For example, suicide attempts may be expected when facing an abusive and powerless context (e.g., in a prearranged marriage; Syme et al., 2016) or when one has committed a serious social infraction that may result in imprisonment or execution (Syme & Hagen, 2019b). However, suicidality may present itself among those with BPD in less severe contexts. Accordingly, individuals with BPD may have a heightened sensitivity to loss of relationships, and are thus more likely to use suicidality as a method of maintaining those relations.

From two different theoretical perspectives, I can infer two different causal origins of relationship-seeking in BPD. From Soper's (2017, 2018, 2019, 2021) pain and brain model, extreme relationship-seeking in BPD could be perceived as an outcome of suicidality. From the signalling perspective (Stengel 1952; Syme et al., 2016; Rosenthal 1993; Wiley 2020), suicidality could be seen as an outcome of the relationship-seeking-nature of BPD.

Even here, while I contrast these perspectives, it does not mean that one or the other exists as the only explanation of relationship-seeking in BPD. Firstly, perhaps I am wrong in my musings, and neither theory explains anything here. Alternatively, cyclical interaction between these two theories is possible, wherein one iteratively props-up the other. It is conceivable that a proneness to suicidality caused by an inability to find beauty in the ordinary results in heightened importance of interpersonal relations. In addition, suicidality may also convey that a given relationship is sincerely important to the expresser. Thus, both theories act to increase the effects of one another. They are not mutually exclusive. Readers interested in more detailed definitions of these perspectives can refer to Gunn et al. (2020). Additionally, Chatterjee and Rai (2021) provide recommended trajectories for better integration of these perspectives with proximate mechanisms (as apposed to ultimate mechanisms).

### **Integration with alternative thinking on causes of BPD**

Speculation on the origins of BPD suggest there are complimentary environmental and genetic predictors of the disorder that may play a causal role. Environmental precursors generally include traumatic childhood events (e.g., physical abuse; Lieb et al., 2004). Additionally, a complex constellation of genes results in slight increases in the probability of developing the disorder, with no specific gene being pin-pointed as the exact cause (Leichsenring et al., 2011; Lieb et al., 2004). This is not an uncommon finding in research examining genetics that underly psychological conditions (Nesse, 2019; Woo et al., 2017).

In terms of integrating what is already thought on this topic with what is presented in this article; it is feasible that something in the environment, something in one's genetics, or a combination of the two yields an inability to find beauty in the ordinary. This then plays into the overall development of BPD. If empirical research can be brought forward to support my hypotheses, this may provide a previously unknown piece of the puzzle for theorists to consider. However, as of current a proper integration beyond my general speculations is difficult, given there is little theorizing on causal origins of BPD beyond statements of what antecedents have been empirically discovered. I note here there are perhaps areas of the literature I have failed to consider that provide concrete models on the origins of BPD, and am happy to take recommendations on readings from the scientific community. Ultimately—given my current understanding—I see previous thinking on this topic as mutually inclusive to what I have proposed. That is, my hypotheses do not contradict previous thinking, and if empirically verified could be integrated to form a more complete understanding of BPD.

### **A final alternative hypothesis: One step from death is fully alive**

While there is little scientific writing in the vein of inquiry I have suggesting in this paper, there is some contradictory evidence in the arts. "The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long. And you have burned so very, very brightly." says the owner of the Tyrell corporation to one of his androids, programmed to live for only four years. The above quote is from the film *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1983), which is rich with the theme that proximity to death increases the intensity with which one experiences life; interestingly, something not found in the book the movie is based off of (*Do androids dream of electric sheep?*; Dick, 1968/2011).

Carrying forward this theme from *Blade Runner*, I can extend Humphrey's and Soper's theories in a very different direction relative to the one this paper has fixated on. Humphrey (2011) suggests that the action of projecting beauty onto mundane sensory phenomena motivates humans to preserve life over death. By extension, those who live with higher susceptibility to suicide may experience the world with amplified beauty in order to prompt preservation of life. Thus, endangered life results in greater intensity with which that life is experienced. Accordingly, if those with BPD are truly at larger risk of suicide, they may experience the world with heightened beauty, not lessened beauty.

This point contradicts everything else I have written here, so why bring it up? Firstly, if my hypotheses are found to be incorrect, I do not want this to doom the work of Humphrey and Soper. The hypotheses stated in former sections are my own logical extensions of these authors' theories, but there are other ways they could be extended. Secondly, while I think this point is interesting, I have hesitations about it. It is worth considering that happiness triggers a kind of normal mania: when we have reason to be content we project it onto everything else in life (Nesse 2019 discusses this as a way of maximising return on current success, e.g., a burst of energy when acquiring a new job makes us look good in the new job; with additional reference to Wilson, 2002). What is the root cause of this mania in those with BPD? The world is beautiful when their relationships are going well, but not so when their relationships are not going well (stated as my hypothesis, not as fact). Happiness caused by one object can spill-over onto other objects. Just because one has rationalized something as a cause of happiness does not mean it is the cause. Accordingly, someone with BPD may feel joyfully enthralled with the entire world at times, but researchers will need to be cautious in pinpointing the root cause of this joy. This does not necessarily discredit the stated alternative perspective, but it does highlight potential issues that need investigation. I think there is something interesting here but I am not entirely sure what to make of it. Given how BPD presents (through the DSM diagnostic criteria), I find my hypotheses stated in previous sections more believable, but nothing is for certain at this stage of theorizing.

Notably, the idea that proximity to death renders one fully alive appears highly referenced in pop culture, with occurrences in video games (e.g., Apex Legends), music (e.g., Eyedea, Lil Peep), and literature (e.g., the Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, 1954/1991)—the theme is not unique to *Blade Runner*. There may be value in applying this theme as a psychological theory in development of empirical research.

### Conclusion

The present article suggests that BPD may be characterized by a deficiency to derive beauty from ordinary objects and experiences. This results in a heightened susceptibility to suicidality, which must be compensated by finding alternative objects of beauty or meaning. I propose that interpersonal relationships are those alternative objects. From this, I generate the hypothesis that those with BPD will experience an amplification of the emotions that surround relationships, while enduring muted emotionality in other contexts. Additionally, when BPD manifests without the interpersonal criteria for the disorder, such individuals may be at a heightened risk of suicide, because they have fewer objects from which they can derive meaning-to-live. While there are alternative interpretations of how interpersonal relationships manifest in BPD, I suggest that these could be complimentary as apposed to contradictory. Ultimately, the stated hypotheses set new trajectories for empirical research, with the possibility of uncovering an important piece of the causal puzzle that envelopes BPD. Even if these empirical investigations yield null results, eliminating these possibilities brings psychology closer to concrete theorizing on the causes of BPD.

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