

Examining and Describing the Victim Mentality in People with Borderline Personality Disorder

Peyman Dousti * 

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

Narges Hosseininia 

Ph.D. in Health Psychology, Department of Health Psychology, Kish International Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kish Island, Iran

Abstract

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a prevalent psychological disorder in clinical and community settings. A significant portion of people with BPD seem to carry a victim mentality with them throughout their life years. Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to examine and describe the victim mentality in individuals with BPD using content analysis. The sample consisted of 134 psychological records of individuals diagnosed with BPD who attended a psychological clinic in Tehran between 2021 and 2023. Data saturation was reached after analyzing 33 records. The information obtained from the psychological records was organized, and then the collected data was classified. The findings revealed that the victim mentality in individuals with BPD manifests in five categories, characterized by 12 states and 30 indicators. These categories include: (1) Abandonment of Responsibility, (2) Belief in Being Defeated in Life, (3) Blaming Others and Inducing Guilt, (4) Chronic Feelings of Loneliness, and (5) Feeling Chronically Abused. The findings suggest that the victim mentality in BPD is not merely a role-playing strategy but a deeply ingrained schema about I am a victim.

Keywords: borderline personality disorder, victim mentality, interactive pattern

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* Corresponding Author: peyman.dousti@gmail.com



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Introduction

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a prevalent psychological condition in many clinical and public settings that involves a maladaptive pattern of interacting with the outside world (Brüne, 2016). Impulsive behaviors, feelings of being rejected or ignored, explosive attacks of anger, idealization and devaluation, unstable relationships, and self-injurious thoughts or behavior are among the most important defining characteristics of this disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). People with BPD have experienced various traumas in many cases during their lives (Edery, 2019; Dousti et al., 2024) and it seems that the experience of lifetime traumas is associated with the formation of what is called the victim mentality (John, 2024). So, maybe a group of people with BPD carry the victim mentality with them for years (Edery, 2019).

The word victim is often used to describe a person or group that has had an action taken against them by external circumstances. The term "victim mentality" refers to a cognitive and emotional state (John, 2024) in which an individual consistently perceives themselves as a victim, even when there is evidence to the contrary. This mentality can significantly impact various aspects of a person's life, leading to externalizing blame, refusing to accept personal responsibility, and persistent complaints about life circumstances (Estabrooks, 2020). People with a victim mentality blame others for what happens in their lives, they always complain about bad events in their lives, they don't accept responsibility for their behaviors and choices, and trouble always follows them. most of the time they get into trouble because of their behavior (not necessarily always), but they still seek to find fault in external circumstances (Manfred, 2014). Regardless of further explanation about victim mentality, it seems that although studies on borderline personality disorder (BPD) are increasing (Liu et al., 2024), limited studies have been done on victim mentality in people with borderline personality disorder (BPD).

On the other hand, Historically, recovery from BPD was considered improbable. However, contemporary perspectives emphasize the importance of fostering personal responsibility, along with overcoming learned helplessness and victim mentality, help people with borderline personality disorder to change their life (Edery, 2019). However, the risk of getting stuck in a victim mentality is very high in people with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and this can prevent them from moving on the road to recovery (Tohotoa, 2013). In addition, when individuals with BPD are entrenched in a victim mentality, they may adopt a passive role, viewing their symptoms as insurmountable obstacles rather than targets for intervention (Edery, 2019).

In summary, a deeper understanding of the victim mentality in BPD is crucial for several reasons. First, it may exacerbate the core symptoms of BPD, such as impulsivity, affective instability, and interpersonal difficulties (Leichsenring et al., 2023). Second, a pervasive victim mentality can contribute to fears of abandonment, strained interpersonal relationships, and increased vulnerability to victimization (Cavelti et al., 2022). Finally, addressing the victim mentality can improve treatment approaches, the quality of life and

overall well-being of individuals with BPD (Tohotoa, 2013). So, this research was conducted to examine and describe the victim mentality in people with borderline personality disorder.

Method

This qualitative study employed content analysis to examine and describe the victim mentality in individuals with BPD. The sample consisted of 134 psychological records of individuals diagnosed with BPD who had attended more than 10 sessions at a psychological clinic in Tehran between 2021 and 2023. Data saturation was reached after analyzing 33 records out of 134. These individuals received psychological services without charge and provided informed consent for their anonymized data to be used in the study.

The information extracted from the psychological records was organized and transcribed into MS Word. After repeated readings, recurring patterns in the data were identified and coded as indicators. These indicators were then categorized, and the underlying states represented by each category were determined. The categorization was reviewed by experts experienced in working with individuals with BPD to ensure validity and consensus.

Results

The final sample included 33 records (28 women, 5 men) with a mean age of 29.4 years at the initial assessment. Educational attainment was as follows: 16 with a bachelor's degree, 13 with a master's degree, and 4 with a doctorate. It is worth noting that the age and educational degree of the participants are considered based on the items included in the file during the first referral meeting to receive psychological services. Table 1 presents the categories, states, and indicators of the victim mentality identified in the analysis.

The findings of Table 1 show that there are a total of 5 main categories and 12 states to describe victim mentality in people with borderline personality disorder. A total of 30 codes/indicators describes these 5 main categories and 12 states. Each indicator separately can indicate the existence of a victim mentality in certain categories or states. The 5 categories obtained include the following: 1) abandonment of responsibility, 2) belief in being defeated in life, 3) blaming others and inducing guilt, 4) chronic feelings of loneliness, and 5) feeling chronically abused.

Table 1. The categories, states, and codes of the victim mentality

Main categories	States	Codes/ Indicators
Abandonment of responsibility	Blaming external circumstances	They consider their family, spouse, or others responsible for their unhappiness and many events in their lives. They consider society's conditions responsible for their unhappiness and many events in their lives. Every time they find new excuses responsible for their unhappiness and many events in their lives.
	Failure to accept responsibility for the consequences of one's actions and choices	By not accepting responsibility for the consequences of their actions and choices, they reject responsibility.
	The feeling of being oppressed and unjust	By saying that the world has given things to others and not to me, she expresses her/ his feeling of injustice. Expresses her/ his sense of injustice by stating that everything is easier for others than for me. In many situations, they think of themselves as a person who has been wronged and wallow in self-pity. By saying I have no luck, it feels like a victim. By saying that my situation is different from others and that my situation is worse than others, they feel like a victim. They don't see other people's efforts for things they have and she/ he doesn't have, and then feel like a failure and a victim.
Belief in being defeated in life	Not doing enough to improve the situation	By expressing the phrase, my efforts are not working, they feel like a failure. They don't put enough effort into what they want, and then they feel like a failure and a victim.
	Insignificance of their achievements	By ignoring their achievements or downplaying what they have, they feel like a failure and a victim. By blaming others for her/ his own mistakes, she/ he makes others feel guilty.
Blaming others and making them feel guilty	Emotional stimulation of others	By blaming others for anything, they make others feel guilty. By blaming others for their own circumstances, they make others feel guilty. By emotionally stimulating others and playing the role of the victim, they make others feel guilty. About others, they expect a lot to satisfy their own needs, and as a result of others' reactions to them, they feel neglected.
	High expectations from others	By stating that the important people in their lives have ignored them or did not love them as they should and did not respond to their needs, they experience the feeling of being neglected.
	Feeling attacked or criticized	At the slightest criticism, they feel attacked and wallow in self-pity. At the slightest feeling of being ignored, they wallow in self-pity.
Chronic feelings of loneliness	Expressing that no one understands me	By whining about things that concern them, they seek sympathy and pity. By constantly recounting the unpleasant events of the past, they attract sympathy and pity.
	Expressing that no one wants me	By expressing not being understood by others, they try to gain sympathy and pity.
	Expressing that no one has helped or supported me	By expressing not being wanted and not being accepted by others, they express their feelings of loneliness. By expressing the phrase, there was never anyone to help and if I made progress it was only because of my own efforts, they express their feeling of loneliness. Others who have made more progress have had a lot of support, but I haven't had anyone.
Feeling chronically abused	Expressing abuse	Expressing that in most of my relationships, others abuse me. Expressing that others want me as long as they need me. They say that I have given everything to those around me, but I have never received anything.

Another finding of this research indicated that in every 33 investigated cases, there were more than three indicators describing victim mentality, and almost no case was observed in which none of the indicators of victim mentality was present. The data analysis of this research shows that people with borderline personality disorder deeply believe in being a victim. It's not because they play the victim mentality, it's because it's what they deeply believe. This may be due to the life experiences that have created a victim mentality for them in the form of a schema with the content that I am the victim and most of my problems are the fault of others, family, and society.

Discussion

Individuals with BPD often exhibit distinct and maladaptive interpersonal patterns that can lead to significant challenges in various life domains, including work, education, family, and social relationships. The findings of this study suggest that at least some of the problems that people with borderline personality disorder have in interacting with others are related to the prevalence of victim mentality in them. The psychological records examined in this research show that all the people participating in this research have experienced the victim mentality in some way. While limited research exists on this specific topic, the current findings regarding externalizing blame and refusing to accept responsibility are consistent with previous work (Manfred, 2014; Estabrooks, 2020). The presence of a victim mentality in individuals with BPD has also been noted in other studies (Tohotoa, 2013; Edery, 2019).

The identified categories of victim mentality can be linked to several core features of BPD. For instance, the tendency to blame others and induce guilt may be associated with the anger and rage frequently observed in BPD (Scott et al., 2017). This may be because, in this category, the person emotionally provokes others, has excessive expectations of them, and constantly feels attacked or criticized. In this category of victim mentality, we observe that a person expects a lot from others to satisfy their needs. As a result of how others react to them, they feel neglected and become angry. The belief in being defeated in life may contribute to chronic feelings of emptiness, another hallmark of BPD (Miller et al., 2020). The findings of this category showed us that the person ignores achievements or considers them small. On the other hand, they don't put enough effort into what they want and say that everything is harder for me than others. This issue in itself can be associated with a greater sense of emptiness. Unstable relationships are another characteristic associated with borderline personality disorder (Bozzatello et al., 2021), which can also be understood through the category of chronic feelings of abuse. Findings related to this category indicates that individuals with BPD often perceive that others take advantage of them and only value them as long as they serve a need. This perception may contribute to the instability of their relationships. Another feature of borderline personality disorder is idealization and devaluation (Biskin & Paris, 2012). This characteristic can also be explained through the category of abandoning responsibility within the victim mentality. The tendency to avoid responsibility is linked to patterns of

idealization and devaluation, as individuals with a victim mentality often attribute the causes of events in their lives to external factors. They may hold their family, spouse, or others accountable for their experiences rather than recognizing their own role in these situations.

The deeply ingrained nature of the victim mentality in BPD suggests that it may function as a schema, shaping an individual's self-perception and worldview. This schema, characterized by the core belief of being a victim, can significantly influence interpersonal interactions with the surrounding environment, family, society, and bad luck, etc.

Among the limitation of this research is that borderline personality disorder (BPD) is rarely diagnosed in isolation and is often comorbid with other psychiatric disorders. Therefore, participants in this study may have additional diagnoses beyond BPD. Future research should aim to develop a tool for measuring victim mentality based on the findings of this study. Additionally, mental health professionals working with individuals with BPD are encouraged to consider these findings in their clinical practice."

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines: This research was done with the informed consent of the research participants. The volunteers were assured that their information would remain confidential. This research did not cause any physical or mental harm to the participants. This research did not have any financial costs for the participants. Participants had the freedom to withdraw from the research.

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Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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