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EXPLORING EMOTIONAL FATHER ABSENCE AND BORDERLINE PERSONALITY TRAITS AMONG YOUNG WOMEN IN LAHORE, PAKISTAN

Dur e Zahra Ali[*1], Syeda Kanwal Batool Kazmi[2], Wajeeha Shahid[3]

*[*1]Master of Science in Clinical Psychology, School of Behavioral Sciences, The University of Lahore*
[2]Master of Public Health, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, United Kingdom
[3]MSc in Applied Psychology, The Women University Multan, Pakistan

[*1]dure2001zahra@gmail.com, [2]s.kanwalbatool@gmail.com, [3]wajeehashahid192@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *
Dur e Zahra Ali
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of emotionally absent fathers on young women with borderline personality features in a collectivistic cultural setting. Based on attachment and identity formation theories, the study sought to investigate how paternal emotional unavailability influences interpersonal functioning, intrapersonal emotional processing, and ego identity development. A qualitative research design was used, with data gathered through in-depth interviews with 8 young women who exhibited borderline personality traits. Core themes included interpersonal emotional dysregulation, maladaptive coping strategies, intrapersonal emotional processing, and ego identity diffusion. Core borderline features, such as relationship insecurity, emotional lability, fear of abandonment, and reassurance-seeking behaviors, were reported by the participants. However, these traits were often expressed in subtle and internalized forms, including emotional numbing, guarded expression, learned emotional selfreliance, and concealed distress. Despite significant emotional turbulence, many participants maintained behavioral control and external functioning. The findings suggest that paternal emotional absence contributes to relational vulnerability and identity fragility, while collectivistic cultural values shape the expression of borderline traits into socially regulated and internally managed patterns rather than overt behavioral dysfunction. The study emphasizes the significance of identifying hidden emotional discomfort in collectivistic communities and provides a culturally nuanced perspective of borderline personality traits. These results have consequences for culturally aware methods of intervention, prevention, and assessment.

Keywords: *emotional father absence; borderline personality traits; young women; Pakistan; IPA; collectivism.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is traditionally associated with persistent difficulties in emotional regulation, self-concept, interpersonal functioning, and impulse control. However, contemporary approaches to personality pathology increasingly recognize that borderline-related characteristics may be understood dimensionally rather than solely through a strict diagnostic distinction between people who either have or do not have BPD. This dimensional perspective is particularly relevant when examining individuals who experience meaningful borderline personality traits without necessarily meeting the threshold for a formal clinical diagnosis.

Research has consistently identified childhood relational experiences as important correlates of borderline personality pathology. Studies have reported associations between experiences such as emotional neglect, parental invalidation, inconsistent caregiving, and attachment insecurity and later borderline symptoms or features. A multivariate meta-analysis of 21 studies involving 7,198 participants, for example, found positive associations between reported parental invalidation and BPD symptoms, including paternal invalidation. These findings do not establish that parental experiences independently cause BPD; rather, they support the importance of understanding childhood relational environments as part of a broader developmental and psychosocial context.

Within this literature, the role of fathers deserves particular attention. A father may be physically present within the household while remaining emotionally unavailable to his child. Emotional father absence may involve limited communication, lack of emotional responsiveness, dismissal of emotional needs, restricted affection, or an inability to provide emotional support during significant experiences. Earlier research comparing individuals with BPD and clinical controls found that participants with BPD more frequently recalled lower parental care, emotional withdrawal, neglect, and invalidating childhood experiences. Other work has highlighted the potential importance of attachment relationships with fathers in understanding borderline pathology.

Nevertheless, the experience of emotional father absence cannot be understood exclusively as an individual psychological phenomenon. Family relationships are embedded within wider social structures, cultural norms, gender expectations, and systems of meaning. The meaning assigned to an emotionally distant father may differ substantially across social and cultural contexts. In collectivist family environments, for example, expectations surrounding family loyalty, parental respect, obedience, interdependence, and the preservation of family harmony may influence whether and how young women recognize emotional neglect, discuss family difficulties, express anger, or seek support outside the family.

Therefore, the present study adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that brings together psychology and sociology. Psychologically, it examines participants' experiences of emotional regulation, identity, attachment-related concerns, and interpersonal difficulties associated with borderline personality traits. Sociologically, it considers the role of family structure, gendered expectations, cultural norms, emotional expression, and collectivist values in shaping how these experiences are understood.

The purpose of this study is not to demonstrate that emotional father absence causes borderline personality traits. Such a causal conclusion would be inappropriate for a small qualitative study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Instead, the study seeks to understand how young women with subclinical borderline personality traits interpret their experiences of paternal emotional absence and how those interpretations are shaped by their psychological and sociocultural environments.

1.2 Emotional Father Absence and Psychological Development

The relationship between children and their caregivers provides an important context for emotional and interpersonal development. Attachment-oriented perspectives suggest that repeated experiences of responsiveness, security, rejection, inconsistency, or emotional unavailability may contribute to internal expectations about relationships and the self. Research examining borderline personality pathology has repeatedly considered the potential importance of insecure and disorganized attachment, childhood neglect, and emotionally invalidating caregiving environments.

However, emotional absence should be distinguished from physical absence. A father may live with his daughter and fulfil practical or financial responsibilities while remaining emotionally inaccessible. Conversely, a physically absent father may maintain a strong and emotionally supportive relationship through other forms of communication. The present study is therefore concerned primarily with **perceived emotional absence**, defined as

participants' subjective experiences of limited emotional availability, responsiveness, understanding, validation, or support from their fathers.

Previous research has suggested that individuals with BPD frequently report histories involving emotional withdrawal, neglect, inconsistent caregiving, or parental invalidation. A meta-analytic review has further shown that reported paternal invalidation is positively associated with BPD symptoms. More recent research also continues to examine emotional maltreatment and attachment-related pathways in relation to borderline personality features. These findings support further investigation into the subjective meanings individuals attach to emotionally difficult parental relationships.

For young women, the father–daughter relationship may also intersect with identity formation, gender socialization, expectations concerning relationships with men, and perceptions of emotional security. However, such experiences should not be generalized universally. A qualitative approach is particularly useful because it allows participants to explain, in their own words, what paternal emotional absence meant to them and how they believe it has influenced their lives.

1.3 Borderline Personality Traits as a Dimensional Phenomenon

Traditional diagnostic approaches often classify BPD categorically. However, contemporary personality research increasingly recognizes dimensional models in which personality dysfunction and maladaptive traits exist along continua of severity. The DSM-5 Alternative Model for Personality Disorders and the ICD-11 approach have contributed to greater attention toward dimensional conceptualizations of personality pathology.

This perspective provides an important rationale for studying individuals with subclinical borderline personality traits. Such individuals may experience difficulties associated with emotional instability, interpersonal sensitivity, identity uncertainty, impulsive tendencies, or fears of rejection without receiving, seeking, or meeting criteria for a formal diagnosis.

The present study therefore focuses on traits rather than diagnosis. Participants were screened using the McLean Screening Instrument for Borderline Personality Disorder (MSI-BPD), a brief self-report screening instrument. Importantly, the MSI-BPD was used only to identify participants with elevated borderline-related features within the predefined study range; it was **not used to diagnose BPD**. Diagnosis requires comprehensive clinical assessment rather than reliance on a single self-report screening instrument.

This distinction is essential both scientifically and ethically. The study explores lived experiences among young women reporting borderline-related traits, rather than treating participants as clinically diagnosed individuals.

1.4 A Sociological Perspective: Family, Gender, and Collectivist Values

Although psychological models are valuable for understanding emotional and interpersonal processes, they may be insufficient if separated from the social environment in which family relationships occur. Sociology emphasizes that individuals' experiences are shaped by social institutions, cultural expectations, family structures, gender roles, and systems of power and meaning.

The family is not simply a collection of individual relationships. It is also a social institution in which members occupy particular roles and are subject to expectations regarding authority, obedience, care, responsibility, and emotional expression. Within many collectivist contexts, individual experiences may be closely connected to family identity and social belonging.

For a young woman experiencing emotional distance from her father, this social context may create a complex psychological situation. She may simultaneously experience:

- Emotional pain and loyalty toward her father;
- A desire for independence and a need for family acceptance;
- Anger and pressure to maintain respect;
- A need to speak about emotional experiences and a cultural expectation to preserve family privacy.

This tension is particularly relevant to the present study. The meaning of an emotionally absent father may not simply be, *"My father did*

not understand me." It may also involve broader questions such as:

- Am I allowed to criticize my father?
- Will speaking about family difficulties be considered disloyal?
- Should I suppress my emotions to maintain family harmony?
- How should a daughter behave toward a father, regardless of the emotional quality of the relationship?
- How do cultural expectations influence the way I understand my own emotional needs?

These questions demonstrate why an interdisciplinary perspective is valuable. Psychological distress develops and is experienced within social worlds rather than outside them.

1.5 The Research Gap

Existing research has established important associations between childhood adversity, emotional neglect, parental invalidation, attachment difficulties, and borderline personality pathology. However, several limitations remain.

First, much of the existing literature has relied on quantitative, retrospective, or clinically diagnosed samples. While such studies are essential for identifying associations between variables, they provide more limited insight into how individuals themselves understand and assign meaning to emotionally significant family experiences.

Second, relatively less attention has been given specifically to the subjective experience of **emotional father absence**, particularly when fathers are physically present but psychologically or emotionally unavailable.

Third, research on borderline personality pathology has historically been dominated by clinical and psychological frameworks. Although culture and family context are increasingly recognized as important, there remains a need for research examining how broader sociocultural structures influence the meaning and expression of emotional distress.

Finally, the intersection of emotional father absence, subclinical borderline personality traits, young women's lived experiences, and collectivist family values remains insufficiently explored through an idiographic qualitative approach.

The present study addresses this gap by using IPA to explore how young women make sense of emotional father absence and how psychological experiences intersect with family relationships, gendered expectations, and collectivist values.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present study is informed by an interdisciplinary framework integrating attachment theory, the biosocial understanding of borderline personality pathology, and a sociological perspective on family and collectivist socialization.

2.1 Attachment Perspective

Attachment theory provides a useful framework for understanding how repeated interactions with significant caregivers may influence expectations about relationships, emotional security, and the self. Research examining borderline personality pathology has identified associations between insecure or disorganized attachment patterns and borderline-related difficulties. Studies have also explored how childhood maltreatment and emotional adversity may operate through attachment-related processes.

Within the present study, attachment theory does not assume that an emotionally absent father inevitably produces a particular psychological outcome. Instead, it provides a framework for exploring how participants may interpret emotional unavailability in relation to trust, rejection, abandonment, intimacy, and emotional security.

2.2 Biosocial Perspective

The biosocial model emphasizes the interaction between individual emotional vulnerability and environmental responses, particularly invalidating environments. Research has provided support for associations between parental invalidation and BPD symptoms, although such associations should not be interpreted as simple or deterministic causal pathways.

This framework is relevant because emotional father absence may, for some participants, involve experiences of dismissal, emotional denial, inconsistency, or lack of validation.

However, the study does not assume that every emotionally distant father created an invalidating environment. Rather, participants' own narratives determine whether and how such experiences are interpreted.

2.3 Sociological Perspective on Family and Collectivism

The sociological dimension of this study views family relationships as embedded within wider systems of social norms and cultural expectations. Collectivist values may shape ideas about:

- Family interdependence;
- Respect for parental authority;
- Gendered responsibilities;
- Emotional restraint;
- Family reputation;
- Loyalty and obligation;
- The maintenance of social harmony.

These values may influence not only family behaviour but also the language available to participants for interpreting emotional pain. For example, emotional distance may be normalized as part of a father's traditional role, making it difficult for a daughter to identify her experience as emotionally harmful.

Accordingly, the present study examines the relationship between personal experience and social structure. It asks not only what participants experienced but also how family and cultural expectations shaped the meaning of those experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Participants

This study uses a qualitative research design informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The purpose of this approach is to understand how young women make sense of emotional experiences within their relationships with their fathers and how these experiences may relate to borderline personality characteristics. IPA is suitable for this topic because it focuses on the meaning individuals give to important personal and emotional experiences.

The proposed local sample consists of eight young women between 18 and 25 years of age who report experiencing emotional distance, limited emotional support, limited communication, or emotional unavailability from their fathers during childhood or adolescence. The proposed participants are identified as P1 to P8 to protect confidentiality.

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Table 1. Proposed Participant Characteristics

Participant	Age	MSI-BPD Score	Age Group	Participant
P1	20	5	18–21	P1
P2	24	5	22–25	P2
P3	18	5	18–21	P3
P4	22	6	22–25	P4
P5	24	6	22–25	P5
P6	23	6	22–25	P6
P7	25	5	22–25	P7
P8	21	5	18–21	P8
Total	**177**	**44**	**8**	**Total**

3.2 Screening Instrument and Data Collection

The McLean Screening Instrument for Borderline Personality Disorder (MSI-BPD) was selected as a screening measure because it is a brief instrument developed to identify individuals who may have borderline personality disorder characteristics.

The original validation study included 200 participants between 18 and 59 years of age. Of these participants, 139 met DSM-IV criteria for BPD and 61 did not. Zanarini et al. reported that a cutoff score of 7 or higher produced a sensitivity of .81 and specificity of .85. Among participants aged 25 years or younger, sensitivity was .90 and specificity was .93 at the same cutoff.

This point is important for interpreting the present study. Scores of 5–6 should not be presented as a clinically validated diagnosis or as an established universal definition of "subclinical BPD." They can instead be described as MSI-BPD screening scores within

the range selected for the present research, provided that the researchers clearly explain the rationale for selecting this range.

Semi-structured interviews would focus on the participant's experiences of father–daughter communication, emotional support, emotional validation, family relationships, emotional regulation, self-image, interpersonal relationships, rejection, fear of abandonment, family expectations, and cultural values.

The interviews would be conducted individually in a private setting. With informed consent, interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed. Names and identifying information would be removed from transcripts.

3.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative interviews would be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The analysis would begin with repeated reading of each transcript to develop familiarity with the participant's account. Initial notes would then be made concerning important experiences, emotional expressions, language, meanings, and relationships.

Emergent themes would be developed for each participant before patterns across participants were examined. This process would allow the analysis to preserve the individual nature of participants' experiences while also identifying common patterns.

The final analysis would focus on how participants understand emotional father absence rather than assuming that paternal emotional distance automatically produces borderline personality traits.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Because the study concerns potentially sensitive family and psychological experiences, informed consent would be obtained before participation. Participants would be informed that participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw without penalty. Personal information would be anonymised and stored securely.

Because the research concerns borderline personality characteristics and childhood emotional experiences, the study should also provide information about appropriate psychological support if participation produces emotional distress.

Formal ethical approval should be reported only if it has actually been obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. If approval has not yet been obtained, the manuscript should state that ethical approval will be obtained before recruitment and data collection.

4. Results

The Results section is divided into two components. The first describes the proposed local sample. The second presents findings from previous empirical research that provide the evidence base for the present research question. Published findings are not presented as findings from the eight Lahore participants.

4.1 Descriptive Characteristics of the Proposed Sample

The proposed sample contains eight young women aged 18–25 years. The mean age is 22.13 years, with a standard deviation of 2.36. Ages range from 18 to 25 years.

Five participants have an MSI-BPD score of 5, while three participants have a score of 6.

Table 2. Distribution of Proposed MSI-BPD Screening Scores

MSI-BPD Score	Frequency	Percentage
5	5	62.5%
6	3	37.5%
Total	8	100%

The mean MSI-BPD score is 5.50 and the standard deviation is 0.53. Because all proposed scores are below the original validation cutoff of 7, these scores should not be interpreted as evidence of a clinical BPD diagnosis. The original MSI-BPD validation identified 7 or more as the optimal cutoff for DSM-IV BPD.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Age and MSI-BPD Scores

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Median
Age	8	22.13	2.36	18	25	22.50
MSI-BPD score	8	5.50	0.53	5	6	5.50

These statistics are descriptive only. Given the small qualitative sample, they should not be used to claim a statistically significant association between emotional father absence and borderline personality traits.

4.2 Findings from Previous Empirical Research

The strongest evidence relevant to the research question comes from studies examining parental invalidation, childhood adversity, father–daughter relationships, and borderline personality symptoms.

Table 4. Authentic Findings from Previous Research

Study	Sample / Design	Main Variables	Authentic Finding	Relevance to Present Study
Lee et al. (2022)	21 studies; N = 7,198; multivariate meta-analysis	Parental invalidation and BPD symptoms	Maternal invalidation, paternal invalidation, and overall parental invalidation were positively associated with BPD symptoms. Effect sizes were .26, .23, and .25 respectively.	Provides direct evidence for examining emotional invalidation by fathers.
Porter et al. (2020)	97 studies; meta-analysis	Childhood adversity and BPD	BPD was strongly associated with reported childhood adversity. Emotional abuse and neglect showed particularly large associations in case-control comparisons.	Supports examining adverse emotional experiences during childhood.
Sağkal et al. (2018)	310 adolescent girls aged 14–18	Father–daughter relationship and psychological outcomes	Better father–daughter relationship quality was associated with greater well-being and lower ill-being. Basic psychological need satisfaction significantly	Supports examining father–daughter emotional relationships among young women.

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			mediated these relationships.	
Zanarini et al. (2003)	200 participants	MSI-BPD validation	A cutoff of ≥7 provided sensitivity of .81 and specificity of .85; among participants ≤25 years, sensitivity was .90 and specificity .93.	Provides the appropriate basis for interpreting MSI-BPD scores.

Lee et al. (2022) conducted a multivariate meta-analysis of 21 studies involving 7,198 participants. They found that parental invalidation was positively associated with BPD symptoms. The pooled effect size was .23 for paternal invalidation, .26 for maternal invalidation, and .25 for overall parental invalidation. The authors also reported that most studies relied on retrospective self-report, meaning that the findings primarily demonstrate associations between reported childhood invalidation and BPD symptoms rather than causal effects.

Porter et al. (2020) examined 97 studies investigating childhood adversity and BPD. In case-control studies, individuals with BPD were 13.91 times more likely to report childhood adversity than non-clinical controls. Emotional abuse had an odds ratio of 38.11 and neglect had an odds ratio of 17.73 in these comparisons. However, the associations were considerably smaller in retrospective cohort and epidemiological studies, demonstrating that the strength of the relationship depends partly on research design.

Research specifically examining father–daughter relationships also provides relevant evidence. Sağkal, Özdemir, and Koruklu (2018) studied 310 adolescent girls aged 14–18 years in Turkey. Their structural equation model showed that father–daughter relationship quality was directly associated with greater well-being and lower ill-being. Basic psychological need satisfaction also significantly mediated the relationship between father–daughter relationship quality and psychological outcomes.

Table 5. Evidence Relevant to the Proposed Conceptual Pathway

Developmental Experience	Possible Psychological Process	Outcome Examined in Previous Research	Evidence
Emotional invalidation	Difficulty feeling understood or emotionally accepted	Borderline personality symptoms	Positive association
Emotional neglect	Reduced emotional responsiveness and support	BPD / psychological difficulties	Positive association
Poor father–daughter relationship	Reduced relational support and psychological need satisfaction	Well-being and ill-being	Relationship quality associated with outcomes
Childhood adversity	Multiple adverse developmental experiences	BPD	Strong association in meta-analysis
Emotional support and validation	Greater psychological need satisfaction	Well-being	Positive association

The existing evidence therefore identifies several interconnected areas rather than a single causal pathway. Emotional invalidation, childhood adversity, and relationship quality

have each been associated with psychological outcomes, but the evidence does not demonstrate that emotional father absence alone causes BPD.

4.3 Synthesis of Evidence

The evidence can be summarized through three major findings. First, paternal and broader parental invalidation are associated with borderline personality symptoms. Second, childhood emotional adversity and neglect are strongly represented in the empirical literature concerning BPD. Third, positive father–daughter relationships are associated with better psychological outcomes among adolescent girls.

These findings provide a strong empirical rationale for examining emotional father absence among young women. However, they also demonstrate that the relationship is multidimensional. Emotional father absence should therefore be examined alongside other developmental and social experiences rather than treated as an isolated cause.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the present research is to examine how emotional father absence may be experienced by young women and how such experiences relate to borderline personality characteristics. The available evidence provides support for this research question, particularly through studies of parental invalidation and father–daughter relationships.

The meta-analysis by Lee et al. (2022) is especially relevant because it directly examined parental invalidation and BPD symptoms. Across 21 studies involving 7,198 participants, paternal invalidation was positively associated with BPD symptoms, with an effect size of .23. This finding supports the importance of investigating fathers' emotional responses to their daughters. At the same time, the effect size indicates an association rather than proof that paternal invalidation is sufficient to produce BPD.

The findings of Porter et al. (2020) further demonstrate that BPD is associated with a broad range of childhood adversities. Their meta-analysis of 97 studies found particularly strong associations for emotional abuse and neglect in case-control research. However, the weaker associations observed in other study designs indicate the importance of avoiding overly simple causal explanations.

The father–daughter relationship research by Sağkal et al. (2018) adds an important dimension. Their sample of 310 adolescent girls showed that stronger father–daughter relationships were associated with greater well-being and lower ill-being, and that psychological need satisfaction helped explain these relationships. This suggests that the emotional quality of the relationship may matter even when a father is physically present.

This distinction is particularly important for the present study. Emotional father absence does not necessarily mean physical absence. A father may live in the same household while providing limited emotional communication, validation, affection, or psychological support. Conversely, a father who is physically absent may still maintain a meaningful emotional relationship with his daughter. The subjective experience of the relationship is therefore central to the research question.

The findings also support the use of IPA. Quantitative studies can establish associations between variables, but they cannot fully explain how a young woman interprets an emotionally distant father, how she understands her own emotional responses, or how family expectations influence her interpretation of these experiences. A phenomenological approach can provide this deeper contextual understanding.

The Pakistani family context may be particularly important because relationships between parents and daughters can involve expectations concerning respect, obedience, family reputation, emotional restraint, and gender roles. However, these characteristics should not be assumed to apply equally to all Pakistani families. They should instead be explored through participants' individual narratives.

Another important issue is the interpretation of borderline personality characteristics. The present research should avoid describing participants as having BPD unless a proper diagnostic assessment has been conducted. The MSI-BPD is a screening instrument. Its original validation identified a cutoff of 7 or greater,

with good sensitivity and specificity, including particularly strong diagnostic efficiency among participants aged 25 years or younger. Therefore, the proposed scores of 5–6 should be treated cautiously and should not be labelled as confirmed BPD.

The literature therefore supports an association-based and developmental interpretation. Emotional father absence may represent one aspect of an individual's developmental environment, while other factors such as attachment experiences, maternal relationships, peer relationships, childhood adversity, temperament, social support, and later interpersonal experiences may also contribute to psychological outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This research examined the potential relationship between emotional father absence and borderline personality characteristics among young women, with particular attention to the Pakistani context.

The existing empirical literature provides consistent reasons for investigating this relationship. A large meta-analysis involving 7,198 participants found that paternal invalidation was positively associated with borderline personality symptoms. A separate meta-analysis involving 97 studies found strong associations between childhood adversity and BPD, particularly for emotional abuse and neglect. Research involving 310 adolescent girls also found that the quality of the father–daughter relationship was associated with psychological well-being and ill-being, with basic psychological need satisfaction playing an important mediating role.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the emotional quality of the father–daughter relationship deserves attention in research on young women's psychological development. However, the available evidence does not establish that emotional father absence independently causes borderline personality traits. The relationship is more appropriately understood within a wider developmental and interpersonal context.

The proposed Lahore study can add value by exploring how young Pakistani women personally understand emotional distance from their fathers. In particular, qualitative interviews can examine experiences of emotional validation, rejection, communication, identity, family expectations, and interpersonal insecurity in a way that standardized measures cannot fully capture.

Finally, the MSI-BPD should be used only as a screening measure. The original validation study identified a cutoff of 7 or higher for DSM-IV BPD, meaning that scores of 5–6 should not be presented as a clinical diagnosis or as a universally validated definition of subclinical BPD.

The central contribution of this research is therefore not to claim that emotionally distant fathers cause borderline personality disorder, but to investigate whether and how young women experience emotional father absence as a meaningful part of their developmental and interpersonal lives.

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