

## Summary

# The Sequential Mediating Effect of Mentalization and Emotion Regulation Difficulties in the Relationship Between Insecure Attachment Patterns and Borderline Personality Organization

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Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is an important psychopathology that leads to destructive effects in the lives of individuals and is characterized by serious impairments in interpersonal relationships, impulsivity, self-perception and affect (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). It was found that 84% of individuals diagnosed with BPD had suicidal ideation, 35% had at least one suicide attempt, and 10% committed suicide and ended their lives (Asnaani et al., 2007). In addition to suicide ideation and attempts observed in BPD, the high comorbid nature of the disorder is among the factors that exacerbate the destructive effects on individuals' lives (Levy & Pantelides, 2020). To date, many studies have been conducted to discover the etiology of the disorder, taking into account the negative consequences of BPD, which can extend to ending the lives of individuals. Attachment, emotion regulation and mentalization have also been the subject of many researches in personality psychopathologies, especially within the framework of BPD.

In the attachment theory developed by Bowlby (1969), it was stated that as a result of the quality of the bilateral relations established with the caregiver, internal working models develop, and these models affect the whole life of the individual. This developmental perspective of attachment theory, which includes infancy and adulthood, has been used many times by researchers and theorists aiming to explain the etiology of BPD, and situations characterized by BPD have been explained on the basis of attachment theory (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004; Blatt et al., 1997; Gunderson, 1996).

Mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties are also among the important variables investigated within the framework of BPD. Mentalization involves the ability of the individual to think and interpret about the actions, beliefs, emotions, and attitudes of himself

and others (Allen & Fonagy, 2006). The concept of difficulties in emotion regulation refers to the difficulties experienced in the awareness and clarity of the individual's emotions, the prevention of impulsive behaviors, the acceptance of emotions and the capacity of emotion regulation (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Studies have shown that mentalization skills and difficulties in emotion regulation have an important role in the nature of BPD (Daros & Williams, 2019; Rishede et al., 2021).

Since the foundations of both mentalization and emotion regulation skills are laid in the relationship with the caregiver, both processes are very sensitive to the caregiver's attitudes. While the caregiver's providing a safe environment and being consistent, being sensitive to and reflecting the infant's emotions and mental processes are associated with enhanced mentalization and emotion regulation capacity; inconsistent, punitive, insensitive and cold parental attitudes characterized by insecure attachment negatively affect the development of these two processes (Fonagy & Luyten, 2016; Thompson & Goodman, 2005). From this point of view, it has been stated by various researchers that mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties may have important roles on the path from attachment patterns to BPD, and these etiological theories explaining BPD have been supported by many empirical studies (Bateman & Fonagy, 2008; Tatnell et al., 2017). However, when the relevant literature is reviewed, the roles of difficulties in emotion regulation and mentalization skills between attachment patterns and BPD have been evaluated by separate studies, and a common effect of these two processes has not been examined. Based on this, this study aimed to evaluate the serial mediation effects of mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties in the relationship between insecure attachment patterns and borderline personality structure.

## Method

### Participants

Research participants were 265 individuals, 41 men and 224 women, between the ages of 18-25, studying at a university in Turkey.

### Measures

#### *Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R)*

The main purpose of the scale developed by Fraley et al. (2000) is to measure the attachment patterns of individuals through their attitudes towards their romantic relationships. The scale has two sub-dimensions, anxious and avoidant, and consists of 36 items, which are 7-point Likert-type scale, with 18 questions in each sub-dimension. The Turkish adaptation of the scale was carried out by Selçuk et al. (2005). In this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the scale was .90 and test-retest reliability was determined as .81 for the avoidance sub-dimension and .82 for the avoidance sub-dimension.

#### *Mentalization Scale*

The mentalization scale was developed to evaluate the mentalization skills of individuals (Dimitrijević et al., 2018). The scale consists of three sub-dimensions, motivation, self, and others, and of 25 items with 5-point Likert-type scale. The Turkish validity and reliability study of the scale was carried out by Özçürümez and Alpay (2021), and the total internal consistency coefficient of the scale was found to be .84.

#### *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-16)*

DERS-16, developed by Bjureberg et al. (2016), is the abbreviated version of the DERS developed by Gratz and Roemer (2004). The scale consists of 16 items with 5-point Likert-type scale and consists of the sub-dimensions of openness, non-acceptance, strategies, impulses and goals. The scale was adapted to Turkish by Yiğit (2017), and the internal consistency coefficient was found to be .92.

#### *Borderline Personality Inventory (BPI)*

The BPI developed by Leichsenring (1999) consists of 53 items. The answers to the questions in the scale are marked as true or false, the correct questions are evaluated as 1 point, the wrong questions are evaluated as 0 points, and the total score is calculated. The increase in the total scores obtained from the scale represents the increase in the borderline personality level. In the adaptation study of the scale carried out by Aydemir et al. (2006), the internal consistency coefficient was determined as .92.

## Results

### Findings on Bilateral Relations Between Research Variables

The results of the correlation analysis carried out to evaluate the bilateral relations between the variables evaluated in the study are shown in Table.1.

#### Mediation Analysis Findings

In the study, the serial mediating effects of mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties were evaluated through the Process Macro extension added to the SPSS-25 package program. In mediation analysis, 5000 Bootstrap technique was used (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

In the first of the models created to evaluate the mediating effects, the anxious attachment pattern predicts the mentalization skill in the negative direction ( $\beta = -.36, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.28, -.15]$ ) and the emotion regulation difficulties in the positive direction ( $\beta = .45, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.22, .37]$ ). The effects of mentalization on emotion regulation difficulties ( $\beta = -.19, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.33, -.09]$ ) and borderline personality structure ( $\beta = -.12, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.28, -.15]$ ) were found to be significant. Moreover, the effect of emotion regulation difficulties on borderline personality structure ( $\beta = .41, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.19, .34]$ ) was found significant and the effect of anxious attachment pattern on borderline personality future was also found significant when mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties were controlled.

When the mediating effects were examined, it was determined that the mediating effects of mentalization (CI [.01, .09]) and emotion regulation difficulties (CI [.12, .26]) were significant independent of each other. However, it was observed that the serial mediating effects of mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties were also significant in the relationship between anxious attachment and borderline personality structure (CI [.01, .05]).

When the model outputs where the avoidant attachment pattern is the predictor variable were examined, the effect of the avoidant attachment pattern on mentalization skill was significant ( $\beta = -.32, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.25, -.12]$ ), but when the mentalization skill was controlled, its effect on emotion regulation difficulties was not significant ( $\beta = .09, p > .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.02, .13]$ ). The effect of mentalization on emotion regulation difficulties ( $\beta = -.33, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.49, -.23]$ ) and borderline personality structure ( $\beta = -.14, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.18, -.05]$ ) was found to be significant. The effect of emotion regulation difficulties on borderline personality structure ( $\beta = .50, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.25, .38]$ ) was significant. However, when mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties are controlled, the effect of avoidant attachment on borderline personality structure ( $\beta = .10, p > .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.01, .08]$ ) turned out to be none-significant.

In this model, when the mediating effects were examined, it was found that the mediating effect of mentalization was significant regardless of emotion regulation difficulties (CI [.01, .04]), and the mediating effect of emotion regulation difficulties was not significant regardless of mentalization (CI [-.01, .05]). Finally, the serial mediating effect of mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties in the relationship between avoidant attachment pattern and borderline personality structure was significant (CI [.01, .03]).

### Discussion

As a result of the analyses conducted, the significant effect of insecure attachment dimensions on mentalization is parallel to the literature and the theories of the development of mentalization (Badoud et al., 2018; Fonagy & Luyten, 2016). When mentalization was controlled, the effect of anxious attachment on emotion regulation difficulties was significant, but avoidant attachment did not have a significant effect. Considering previous studies showing the significant effect of avoidant attachment on emotion regulation difficulties (see Lewczuk et al., 2021), findings of the current study are important in terms of showing that mentalization has an important role in this relationship. However, the significant effect of mentalization on emotion regulation difficulties in both models, created to evaluate mediating roles, is among the important findings of the study and supports the theoretical basis of the models created in the research.

In both models, serial mediation effects of mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties are found to be significant in the relationship between insecure attachment patterns and borderline personality structure. The fact that the direct effect of avoidant attachment on borderline personality structure is not significant shows that mentalization and difficulty in emotion regulation have an important role in this relationship. However, the direct effect of anxious attachment on borderline personality structure shows that different processes may be effective in the relationship between the two variables.

When the literature is examined, the effect of insecure attachment patterns, mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties on BPD has been examined by many studies. However, these studies did not examine these three variables within the framework of a model. Therefore, these research findings are important in terms of showing that mentalization and emotion regulation difficulties may have a serial mediator effect on the path from attachment patterns, which are considered to be an important etiological factor for BPD, to borderline personality structure.