Reduced Mentalizing in Patients with Bulimia Nervosa and Features of Borderline Personality Disorder: A case-control study

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Background: Mentalizing, the mental capacity to understand oneself and others in terms of mental states, has been found to be reduced in some mental disorders such as Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Some studies have suggested that Eating Disorders (EDs) may also be associated with impairments in mentalizing, but studies have not always yielded consistent results. This is the first study to systematically investigate mentalizing impairments in patients with Bulimia Nervosa (BN) compared with controls. Additionally, we investigated whether impairments in mentalizing were related to BPD features, rather than BN per se, given the high comorbidity between BPD and BN.

Methods: Patients with BN (n = 53) and healthy controls (HCs; n = 87) completed a battery of measures assessing mentalizing including the Reflective Function Questionnaires, the Object Relations Inventory and the Reading The Mind in The Eyes Test.

Results: BN patients scored significantly lower than HCs on all tests of mentalizing. These differences were partially accounted for by BPD features as assessed with the Zanarini Rating Scale for Borderline Personality Disorder, and partially by bulimic symptoms measured with the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire.

Conclusions: BN patients were found to have significantly lower levels of mentalizing as assessed with a broad range of tests compared to HCs. These differences were related to both bulimic symptoms and BPD features. If replicated, these findings suggest that poor mentalizing may be a significant factor in BN and should be addressed in treatment, regardless of the presence of BPD features.