

The Realities and Unrealities of Borderline Personality Disorder

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It is my contention that Borderline Personality Disorder involves two issues that affect women negatively. First, BPD is defined largely in terms of feminine stereotypes, as if there is something deviant about being feminine. For example, BPD is characterized by stereotypically feminine traits such as fear of abandonment, extreme reactions, unstable self-image, highly changeable moods, and inappropriate anger. This does not allow women to understand the socialized nature of these traits, and thus shuts down political action and advocacy. Second, even if we grant BPD's legitimacy as a real illness, it is nevertheless a tool for silencing women who are victims of sexual abuse, violence, among other things. Women are disproportionately diagnosed with BPD and a majority of them have experienced sexual abuse. Illness implies that something is wrong with the victim when, in the case of abuse resulting in BPD, something is wrong with the perpetrator, or the culture which permits this. Even if legitimate mental issues are present, overmedication and over-diagnosis are tools to invalidate women. Thus, BPD takes what is a social and political issue and makes it the victim's problem to deal with in the private sphere of psychiatry. By pathologizing the product of a political issue, we rule out facing the problem in a way that might help women more than through psychiatry. In sum, there are two distinct ways in which psychiatry silences women, both of which need to be addressed before women can be completely empowered to deal with mental illness.

Keywords: feminist philosophy, mental illness, borderline personality disorder, philosophy of illness, trauma, feminist psychology