

This Week's Citation Classic

Gunderson J G & Singer M T. Defining borderline patients: an overview.
Amer. J. Psychiat. 132:1-10, 1975.
[Harvard Medical School, Boston; McLean Hospital, Belmont, MA;
and Univ. California, Berkeley, CA]

This review of an extensive clinical literature identified six converging features which could be used to identify patients with a borderline personality disorder. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI)® and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicate that this paper has been cited in over 175 publications since 1975.]

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"I first became aware of the need to develop a more rational system for identifying patients who were clinically being called borderline while still a first-year resident in psychiatry. At that time, the term was used frequently and loosely—generally signifying that a patient had been creating problems for the members of the treatment staff. Thus, not only did it in fact have a disparaging connotation, but it also had no respectability within psychiatry as a part of its standard nosological system.

"The actual work on this project began during my residency and continued for two years afterward. At that time, I came in contact with Margaret Singer, who was much interested in this project and had independently planned to review the literature on psychological test characteristics of such patients.

This coincidence led to our collaboration despite the fact that we rarely met and had only limited correspondence during the preparation of this report. Her credentials in an independent area of clinical and academic pursuit added greatly to the breadth of interest and readership which our review eventually attracted. It had been my expectation at the time this review was completed that it would largely serve as a springboard for future empirical studies which I intended to do. I had not anticipated how welcome our effort to clarify the diffuse and often contradictory prior literature would be.

"In the years since the publication of this work, there has been a remarkable proliferation of empirical work. In 1978, along with Jonathan Kolb,¹ I published results of an initial study which showed that, to a large extent, the characteristics of borderlines described in the literature could be used to identify a highly discriminable psychiatric syndrome. Since then, many different investigators using different patient populations and different methods of assessment have identified these same basic characteristics.² These studies provided the basis for identification of borderline personality disorder as a new diagnostic category in the new standard diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association. Its more widespread adoption is foreshadowed by the roughly 25 foreign countries which are now undertaking studies on this patient group. In short, the borderline category has changed from being a 'wastebasket' diagnosis into a widely used and much studied category in the mainstream of psychiatric interest."

1. Gunderson J G & Kolb J E. Discriminating features of borderline patients.

Amer. J. Psychiat. 135:792-6, 1978.

2. Gunderson J G. Empirical studies of the borderline diagnosis. (Grinspoon L, ed.)

Psychiatry 1982, annual review. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1982. p. 415-36.