A MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER (BPD):
EXAMINING EVIDENCE FOR IMPAIRMENTS IN ‘EXECUTIVE FUNCTION’

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

[Signature]

Chris Theunissen

May 2005
Abstract

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a serious psychiatric disorder characterised by turbulent interpersonal relationships, impaired self image, impulsivity, and a recurrent pattern of unstable affect which is usually evident by early adulthood. It has a community prevalence rate of two per cent, and approximately nine per cent of people diagnosed with BPD commit suicide. This suggests that BPD has one of the highest lethality rates of all psychiatric disorders. The course of the disorder shows a steady improvement over the course of early adulthood with the majority of cases remitting by middle age. This positive but incomplete long-term recovery is thought to be a naturalistic outcome that is independent of treatment effect.

The reported study sought to test selected components of a multidimensional developmental neuropsychological model of executive functioning in BPD. The model proposed that BPD is characterised by impairments to four neuropsychological executive functions. These include working memory, response inhibition, affective-attentional bias, and problem-solving. The model further proposed that impaired executive functioning in BPD occurs as a result of the failure of ‘experience-dependent’ maturation of orbitofrontal structures. These structures are closely associated with the development of the ‘cognitive executive’.

The study incorporated a cross-sectional design to analyse data from a BPD group, a Depressed Control Group, and a Medical Control Group. The overall findings of the study returned limited support for the original hypotheses. There was no evidence of deficits in working memory, response-inhibition, or
problem-solving. In contrast, the BPD group returned some evidence of deficits in affective-attentional bias.

Therefore, the results suggest that executive functioning remains largely intact in BPD. This also suggests that people with BPD have the working memory resources necessary to facilitate abstract cognition, have the capacity to effectively plan and execute future-oriented acts, and are able to perform appropriate problem-solving functions. These problem-solving returns are also particularly significant because a number of the tasks utilised in the study are known to be associated with so-called ‘frontal-executive’ function. These unremarkable findings challenge the view that people with BPD might experience some form of subtle neurological impairment associated with frontal-lobe compromise.

The Stroop measure of affective-attentional bias provided the only supportive evidence for the proposed model, and these findings can be accounted for by at least two different explanations. The first suggests that BPD might be characterised by a hypervigilant attentional set. The specific cause of hypervigilance in BPD is unknown, but some candidate factors appear to be the often-reported abuse histories of borderlines, insecure attachment histories, and deficits in parental bonding. The second interpretation suggests that the Stroop findings reflect a form of ‘response conflict’ in which BPD participants experience difficulties overriding tasks that rely on the enunciation of automatic neural routines.

As a result of these findings, further research on the role of arousal, priming, hypervigilance, and response-conflict in BPD is required. It is likely that the Stroop findings reflect a basic, ‘hard-wired’ attentional mechanism that
consolidates by early adolescence at the latest. As a result, the Stroop findings have implications for both the prevention and treatment of BPD.

A number of prevention strategies could be developed to address the attentional issues identified in the present study. These include assisting children to more effectively regulate arousal and affect, and assisting parents to communicate affectively with children in order to enhance self-regulation. The treatment implications suggest that interventions directed at affective-attentional processes are required, and further suggest the need for new pharmacotherapies and psychological treatments to modify dysfunctional attentional process. Affective neuroscience will have an increasingly important role to play in the understanding of BPD, and the next quarter century is likely to witness exciting advances in understanding this most problematic of disorders.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people are involved in the production of a Doctoral thesis that it seems senseless for one person - the author - to claim sole responsibility for the finished product. As I reflect on the number of people who freely gave of their time in assisting me in this task, I am reminded that in this sense this thesis is not mine alone. Nonetheless, I must now acknowledge the significant people who assisted me in the completion of this task.

Firstly, due credit goes to my Doctoral supervisor Professor Iain Walker. He has provided calming but encouraging tutelage when needed. Associated with this also has been the adjunctive assistance of Dr. Pia Broderick who acted as co-opted supervisor during Professor Walker’s sabbaticals, and has further provided wise counsel regarding the advisability of establishing thesis support committees.

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The capacity to show concern for another person whilst enduring one’s own suffering is at the heart of the great faiths of the world. It also represents one aspect of the essence of our connection to each other as human beings. That Dr. Lloyd could show this attention to me under the most desperate of personal circumstances is testimony to her resilience, grace, and sense of self. It is this experience of humanness and care from the other that I believe is often lacking in the life experience of the person with BPD. To her, I dedicate this thesis.

It is not perfect, but it is finished.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract iii
Acknowledgements vi
Contents x
List of Tables xxi
List of Figures xxvii
List of Appendices xxviii
## CONTENTS

### SECTION I: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

#### CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1. OVERVIEW</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3. AIMS OF THE PROJECT</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### CHAPTER TWO: BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER (BPD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BPD</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1. Psychoanalytic Perspectives</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2. BPD as an ‘Affect Spectrum’ Disorder</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3. BPD as an ‘Impulse Spectrum Disorder’</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.4. Disturbed Early Family Environment</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.5. BPD as a ‘Trauma Spectrum Disorder’</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.6. Behavioural Perspectives</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.7. BPD as a ‘Neurobehavioural’ or Psychobiological Disorder</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3. DIAGNOSTIC SYSTEMS IN BPD</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1. Kernberg’s Borderline Personality Organization (BPO)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2. Gunderson’s BPD Criteria</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.3. The International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organisation (ICD)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.4. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.5. Summary and Conclusions</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.4. EPIDEMIOLOGY OF BPD 83
   2.4.1. Prevalence of BPD 83
   2.4.2. Incidence of BPD 93
   2.4.3. Summary 94
2.5. THE COURSE OF BPD 95
   2.5.1. Short-Term Outcome Studies of BPD 95
   2.5.2. Long-Term Outcome Studies of BPD 106
2.6. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUES OF BPD 112
   2.6.1. Diagnostic Validity 112
   2.6.2. Reliability 121
   2.6.3. Assessment 122
   2.6.4. Heterogeneity 126
2.7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS 131

CHAPTER THREE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF IMPAIRED EXECUTIVE FUNCTION IN BPD

3.1. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER 134
3.2. FRONTAL LOBE FUNCTIONS AND ‘FRONTAL’ PATHOLOGY 137
   3.2.1. Development of the Orbitofrontal Cortex 143
3.3. THE CONCEPT OF ‘EXECUTIVE FUNCTION’ (EF) 148
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.4. A MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF EXECUTIVE DISORDER IN BPD</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.1. A Multidimensional Risk Model for BPD</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.2. Impairments to the ‘Central Executive’: Working Memory,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Inhibition, Affective-Attentional Bias, and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.3. Impaired Executive Function in BPD</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5. EXECUTIVE FUNCTION I: IMPAIRED WORKING MEMORY IN BPD</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.1. Empirical Evidence for Impaired Working Memory in BPD</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.2. Assessment of Working Memory in BPD</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6. EXECUTIVE FUNCTION II: IMPAIRED RESPONSE INHIBITION IN BPD</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.1. Assessment of Response Inhibition in BPD: The Application</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the ‘Stop-Signal’ Task</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7. EXECUTIVE FUNCTION III: IMPAIRED AFFECT REGULATION AND</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFFECTIVE-ATTENTIONAL BIAS IN BPD</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7.1. Empirical Evidence for Impaired Affect Regulation in BPD</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7.2. Assessment of Affect Regulation in BPD: The Application</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the ‘Emotional Stroop’ Method</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7.3. Assessment of Affective-Attentional Bias in BPD</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.8. EXECUTIVE FUNCTION IV: IMPAIRED PROBLEM SOLVING IN BPD 199

3.8.1. Empirical Evidence for Impaired Problem-Solving in BPD 199

3.8.2. Assessment of Problem Solving in BPD 208

3.9. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH STUDIES EXAMINING EXECUTIVE FUNCTION IN BPD 209

3.9.1. Sampling Issues 210

3.9.2. Diagnostic Issues 219

3.9.3. Psychiatric Issues 224

3.9.4. Neurological/‘Brain Impairment’ Issues 229

3.10. HYPOTHESES AND DESIGN OF THE PROJECT 235

SECTION II: SELECTION OF DIAGNOSTIC INSTRUMENTS AND VALIDATION OF SCALE ‘C’ OF THE MCMI-III

CHAPTER FOUR: SELECTION OF DIAGNOSTIC INSTRUMENTS AND AN EXAMINATION OF THE VALIDITY OF SCALE ‘C’ (BORDERLINE) OF THE MCMI-III

4.1. OVERVIEW 238

4.2. DIAGNOSTIC INSTRUMENTS EMPLOYED IN THE PROJECT 238

4.3. CONFIRMATORY PSYCHOMETRIC RESEARCH ON THE MCMI-III 240

4.4. PARTICIPANTS 241

4.5. PROCEDURE 241

4.6. RESULTS 242
SECTION III: DEVELOPMENT OF THE EMOTIONAL STROOP TASK AND DESCRIPTION OF THE STOP-SIGNAL PARADIGM

CHAPTER FIVE: METHOD: AFFECTIVE AND SEMANTIC REPRESENTATIONS IN BPD

5.1. OVERVIEW

5.1.1. Identification of Affect Categories for Inclusion in the Stroop Paradigm

5.2. DIAGNOSIS OF BPD

5.3. PARTICIPANTS

5.3.1. Situating the Sample

5.4. PROCEDURE

5.4.1. Screening of BPD Participants

5.5. RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

5.5.1. Interview Procedure

5.5.2. Data Transformation

5.5.3. Decision Rules for Inclusion of Affect Categories in the ‘Emotional Stroop’ Task

5.6. RESULTS

5.6.1. Theoretical and Clinical Implications of Informing Participants That They Meet Criterion for BPD

5.7. AFFECT CATEGORIES

5.7.1. Anger-Rage (Anger)
5.7.2. Distress-Anguish (Sadness)  288
5.7.3. Shame-Humiliation (Shame)  293
5.7.4. Fear-Terror (Anxiety)  299

5.8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS  305

CHAPTER SIX: AFFECT CATEGORY JUDGEMENT TASK

6.1. OVERVIEW  306
6.2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE AFFECT CATEGORY JUDGEMENT TASK (ACJT)  307
6.3. PARTICIPANTS  310
6.4. PROCEDURE  311
6.5. RESULTS  312

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONSTRUCTION OF THE EMOTION WORD COLOUR-NAMING INTERFERENCE (EMOTIONAL STROOP) TASK AND DESCRIPTION OF THE STOP-SIGNAL PARADIGM

7.1. OVERVIEW  315
7.2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE STROOP TASK: EXPERIMENTAL HARDWARE  315
7.3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE STROOP TASK: EXPERIMENTAL SOFTWARE  316
7.4. PROCEDURE  320
7.5. DATA OUTPUT  324
7.6. STOP-SIGNAL PARADIGM  324
### SECTION IV: ASSESSMENT OF EXECUTIVE FUNCTION IN BPD

#### CHAPTER EIGHT: ASSESSMENT OF EXECUTIVE FUNCTION IN BPD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>OVERVIEW</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>AIMS AND HYPOTHESES</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>PARTICIPANTS</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.1</td>
<td>Recruitment of BPD Participants</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.2</td>
<td>Recruitment of Depressed Control Participants</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.3</td>
<td>Recruitment of Medical Control Participants</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>PROCEDURE</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4.1</td>
<td>Session One: Informed Consent, Screening, and Diagnostic Assessment</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4.2</td>
<td>Session Two: Administration of the Emotional Stroop Task and the Stop-Signal Paradigm</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4.3</td>
<td>Session Three: Administration of Screening Instruments, Working Memory and Problem-Solving Executive Tasks</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>RESULTS</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5.1</td>
<td>Analysis of DIB-R and MCMI-III Data</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5.2</td>
<td>Analyses of Hypotheses</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.5.3. Analysis of Hypothesis One: Impaired Working Memory in BPD 377

8.5.4. Analysis of Hypothesis Two: Impaired Response Inhibition in BPD 379

8.5.5. Analysis of Hypothesis Three: Impaired Affective Attentional Bias in BPD 384

8.5.6. Analysis of Hypothesis Four: Impaired Problem Solving in BPD 392

8.5.7. Subsidiary Analyses 395

8.6. CONCLUSIONS 398

SECTION V: DISCUSSION

CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION

9.1. OVERVIEW 401

9.2. A MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF EXECUTIVE DISORDER IN BPD 401

9.3. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDIES 403

9.3.1. Study One: Validity Study of the MCMI-III 403

9.3.2. Study Two: Affective and Semantic Representations in BPD 404

9.3.3. Study Three: Affect Category Judgement Task 405

9.3.4. Study Four: Assessment of Executive Function in BPD 406

9.4. INTERPRETATION OF HYPOTHESES AND THE PRINCIPAL FINDINGS OF THE PROJECT 408

9.4.1. Impaired Working Memory in BPD 408
9.8. IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND EARLY INTERVENTION TO REDUCE THE INCIDENCE OF BPD 485

9.9. CONCLUDING REMARKS 488

REFERENCES 491
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1.1: HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE BPD DIAGNOSIS 14

TABLE 3.1: TESTS EMPLOYED IN THE STUDIES

EXAMINING MEMORY IN BPD 166

TABLE 3.2: TESTS EMPLOYED IN THE STUDIES

EXAMINING PROBLEM-SOLVING IN BPD 201

TABLE 3.3: SAMPLING/DESIGN ISSUES IN THE STUDIES

EXAMINING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING IN BPD 211

TABLE 3.4: SAMPLE SIZES AND DEPENDENT VARIABLES

TO CASE RATIOS FOR THE BPD EXECUTIVE FUNCTION STUDIES 218

TABLE 3.5: DIAGNOSTIC ISSUES IN STUDIES EXAMINING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING IN BPD 221

TABLE 3.6: PSYCHIATRIC ISSUES IN STUDIES

EXAMINING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING IN BPD 225

TABLE 3.7: NEUROLOGICAL ISSUES IN STUDIES

EXAMINING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING IN BPD 230

TABLE 4.1: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR THE SAMPLE

EXAMINING THE VALIDITY OF SCALE ‘C’ (BORDERLINE) OF THE MCMI-III 243

TABLE 4.2: CROSS-TABULATION ANALYSES FOR MCMI-III

SCALE C BPD STATUS WITH DIB-R BPD STATUS 244

TABLE 5.1: TOMKINS AFFECT CATEGORIES 254
TABLE 5.2: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR THE BPD SAMPLE EXAMINING AFFECTIVE AND SEMANTIC REPRESENTATIONS IN BPD 260

TABLE 5.3: MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR DIB-R SCALED SCORES, AND MCMI-III VALIDITY, CLINICAL PERSONALITY PATTERN, SEVERE PERSONALITY PATHOLOGY, AND CLINICAL SYNDROME SCALES FOR THE BPD SAMPLE TABLE 261

TABLE 6.1: AGE, GENDER, PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINE, AND YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR THE EXPERT JUDGE GROUP 311

TABLE 6.2: WORDS BY AFFECT CATEGORY ELIMINATED BY VALIDITY JUDGEMENT OF SPEECH PATHOLOGIST JUDGES 312

TABLE 6.3: AFFECT CATEGORY WORDS INCLUDED IN FINAL STROOP TASK 313

TABLE 6.4: WORD LENGTHS BY GROUP FOR WORDS IN STROOP TASK 314

TABLE 7.1: DATA OUTPUT PROVIDED BY THE STOP-SIGNAL PARADIGM 329

TABLE 8.1: SCREENING AND EXECUTIVE TASKS ADMINISTERED IN SESSION THREE 351
TABLE 8.2: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR THE IDD, PSYCHIATRY, AND NEWSPAPER BPD SUBGROUPS 354

TABLE 8.3: SAMPLE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F STATISTICS FOR DIB-R SCALED SCORES FOR BPD SUBGROUPS 357

TABLE 8.4: SAMPLE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND F STATISTICS FOR MCMI-III VALIDITY, CLINICAL PERSONALITY, AND SEVERE PERSONALITY PATHOLOGY SCALED SCORES 358

TABLE 8.5: SAMPLE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F STATISTICS FOR MCMI-III CLINICAL SYNDROMES SCALED SCORES FOR BPD SUBGROUPS 359

TABLE 8.6: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR THE BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS 366

TABLE 8.7: SAMPLE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F STATISTICS FOR DIB-R SCALED SCORES FOR BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS 369
TABLE 8.8: SAMPLE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F STATISTICS FOR MCMI-III VALIDITY, CLINICAL PERSONALITY, AND SEVERE PERSONALITY PATHOLOGY SCALED SCORES FOR BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS 370

TABLE 8.9: SAMPLE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F STATISTICS FOR MCMI-III CLINICAL SYNDROME SCALED SCORES FOR BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS 371

TABLE 8.10: SAMPLE MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR HYPOTHESISED CONFOUNDING VARIABLES FOR BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS 375

TABLE 8.11: SAMPLE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND F STATISTICS FOR WORKING MEMORY TASKS FOR BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS 378
TABLE 8.12: STOP-SIGNAL PARADIGM MEAN REACTION TIME (MRT), STOP-SIGNAL RESPONSE TIMES (SSRT) AND NUMBER OF NON-RESPONSES AT 0, 100, 200, 300, 400, AND 500 MSECS DELAY MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F STATISTICS FOR BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS

TABLE 8.13: HIGH BPD DIB-R IMPULSE SUBSCALE SUB-GROUP VS. LOW BPD DIB-R IMPULSE SUBSCALE SUB-GROUP ON MRT AND SSRT SCORES


TABLE 8.15: MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F STATISTICS FOR STROOP COLOUR-NAMING RESPONSE TIMES FOR BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS AT SUPRALIMINAL (2000 MSEC), AND SUBLIMINAL (240 MSEC) PRESENTATION
TABLE 8.16: STROOP INTERFERENCE SCORES MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F STATISTICS FOR BPD, DEPRESSED AND MEDICAL CONTROLS FOR SUPRALIMINAL (2000 MSECS) AND SUBLIMINAL (240 MSEC) PRESENTATIONS 391

TABLE 8.17: SAMPLE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND F STATISTICS FOR PROBLEM SOLVING TASKS FOR BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS 393

TABLE 8.18: SAMPLE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND F STATISTICS FOR AUSTIN MAZE TRIALS ONE, FIVE, AND 10 FOR BPD, DEPRESSED, AND MEDICAL CONTROL GROUPS 394

TABLE 8.19: STUDY TWO AND STUDY FOUR DIB-R AND MCMI-III SCALED SCORE BPD ONEWAY ANOVA’S 396
# LIST OF FIGURES

| FIGURE 3.1: | MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF IMPAIRED EXECUTIVE FUNCTION IN BPD | 156 |
| FIGURE 3.2: | HYPOTHESISED IMPAIRMENTS TO THE CENTRAL EXECUTIVE IN BPD | 159 |
| FIGURE 3.3: | SEQUENCE OF STUDIES CONDUCTED IN THIS PROJECT | 236 |
| FIGURE 8.1: | RECRUITMENT PATHWAY FOR BPD CASES | 338 |
| FIGURE 8.2: | RECRUITMENT PATHWAY FOR DEPRESSED CONTROL CASES | 340 |
| FIGURE 8.3: | RECRUITMENT PATHWAY FOR MEDICAL CONTROL CASES | 342 |
| FIGURE 8.4: | ALGORITHM FOR ADMISSION OF PARTICIPANTS INTO STUDY FOUR | 344 |
| FIGURE 9.1: | MODIFIED MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF STROOP COLOUR-NAMING RESPONSE IN BPD | 435 |
# LIST OF APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPENDIX</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I:</td>
<td>ICD-10 CRITERIA FOR ‘EMOTIONALLY UNSTABLE PERSONALITY DISORDER – BORDERLINE TYPE’</td>
<td>549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II:</td>
<td>DSM-IV AND DSM-IV-TR CRITERIA FOR BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER (BPD)</td>
<td>551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III:</td>
<td>DESCRIPTION OF MEASURES AND THE TESTS USED TO MEASURE HYPOTHESES</td>
<td>553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV:</td>
<td>PERSONAL COMMUNICATION FROM MARY ZANARINI REGARDING THE DIB-R</td>
<td>567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V:</td>
<td>DIAGNOSTIC INTERVIEW FOR BORDERLINES – REVISED (DIB-R)</td>
<td>570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI:</td>
<td>‘OWNING’ ONE’S PERSPECTIVE</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII:</td>
<td>DESCRIPTIONS OF EACH RESEARCH PARTICIPANT</td>
<td>595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII:</td>
<td>STUDY II INITIAL SCREENING INTERVIEWS</td>
<td>606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX:</td>
<td>STUDY II INFORMATION SHEET</td>
<td>610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X:</td>
<td>STUDY II CONSENT FORM</td>
<td>615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI:</td>
<td>SAMPLE ITEMS FROM THE AFFECT CATEGORY JUDGEMENT TASK</td>
<td>617</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX XII:  WORD LISTS FOR EACH AFFECT CATEGORY REVIEWED BY SPEECH PATHOLOGIST JUDGES  621

APPENDIX XIII:  NEWSPAPER ARTICLE IN SUNDAY TIMES 18 SEPTEMBER 1999  630

APPENDIX XIV:  TELEPHONE SCREENING INTERVIEW TO EXCLUDE POTENTIALLY CONFOUNDED CASES  633

APPENDIX XV:  TELEPHONE CONTACT TO RECRUIT BPD CASES THROUGH THE DEPARTMENT OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES  636

APPENDIX XVI:  TELEPHONE RECRUITMENT PROCEDURE FOR MEDICAL CONTROL PARTICIPANTS  639

APPENDIX XVII:  INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDY FOUR  641

APPENDIX XVIII:  CONSENT FORM FOR STUDY FOUR  647

APPENDIX XIX:  SCREENING INSTRUMENT FOR STUDY FOUR  649

APPENDIX XX:  SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY  653