

**“Please don’t leave me!”**

**Histrionic Personality Features and Emotional Manipulation:  
The underlying Roles of Anxious Attachment and Need Frustration**

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**Abstract**

Despite its expansive history, histrionic personality disorder (HPD) is one of the least researched mental disorders. Consequently, little is known about its underlying mechanisms and possible maintenance factors, limiting treatment opportunities. Based on Emotion-focused therapy, this study explored the relation of emotional manipulation and HPD, at the same time investigating the underlying role of anxious attachment and need frustration. Therefore, a cross-sectional study was conducted in which 129 participants (24.03% male, 74.42% female, 1.55% non-binary,  $M_{age} = 28.72$ ) completed questionnaires of histrionic personality features, emotional manipulation, anxious attachment and need frustration. Findings of the study indicated that in the presence of histrionic features, emotional manipulation is likely to occur, possibly mediated by fear of abandonment and/or the frustrated feeling of receiving love from others. Unexpectedly, no predictive relation between the two mediators, anxious attachment, and relatedness frustration, on the relation of HPD features and emotional manipulativeness was found. Additionally, autonomy frustration did neither, relate to HPD features or emotional manipulation, meaning that histrionics may experience emotions as volitional.

*Keywords:* Histrionic personality disorder/ features, Anxious Attachment, Emotional manipulation, Frustration of Autonomy, Frustration of Relatedness

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**Histrionic Personality Features and Emotional Manipulation:**

**The underlying Roles of Anxious Attachment and Need Frustration**

Although Histrionic personality disorder (HPD) has an expansive conceptual history, reaching from ancient Egypt to today's modern world, it is one of the mental disorders least researched (Novais et al., 2015). While causes and mechanisms of other personality disorders are extensively explored, HPD is often neglected due to its overlapping facets with borderline personality disorders (BPD), affecting its acknowledgement and treatment (Lewis & Mastico, 2017). HPD belongs to the Cluster B Personality disorders, characterized by attention-seeking, dramatizing and emotional behaviours, showing an increased risk for substance abuse and self-harming behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kraus & Reynolds, 2001). Most often, people with HPD, encounter problems in their interpersonal functioning, reaching from feelings of insecurity and neglect to strong feelings of injustice. Consequently, emotional shifts of fear and anger are experienced, reinforcing conflicts in close relations (Kraus & Reynolds, 2001).

Few existing investigations into the underlying mechanisms of HPD, confirm that dysfunctions in the expression and perception of emotions are a key process hindering cognitive and interpersonal functioning (Wang et al., 2020). Due to this disturbance, maladaptive behaviours, insecure attachment, and intra/interpersonal frustration is facilitated. One maladaptive behaviour promoting interpersonal malfunctioning in HPD, is the emotional manipulative behaviour, applied to make others act in their favour. Emotional manipulation is thought to protect individuals of feeling unworthy or insecure (Wang et al., 2020). However, as it is still unclear which mechanisms cause or reinforce this protection pattern in HPD, it is essential to have a closer look at potential factors.

Therefore, this study investigates possible underlying mechanisms of the relation of HPD and emotional manipulation. In more depth, this study aims to analyze the mediating role of anxious attachment and need frustration regarding the relation of HPD and emotional manipulation. Doing so, self-determination and attachment theory serves as our theoretical perspective. Although research already investigated relations of emotional regulation dysfunctions, need frustration and other pathologies, research concerning HPD was not conducted. Consequently, this study may shed light on underlying mechanisms of HPD, which in turn might give new implications for future research and treatment opportunities (French & Shrestha, 2020).

**Histrionic Personality Features and Emotional Manipulation**

Histrionic personalities are often associated with an emotional and dramatizing character, including exaggerating expressions of emotions and poor interpersonal abilities (Kraus & Reynolds, 2001). More specifically HPD has three core features; 1) being in the center of attention and obsessing over one's physical appearance, 2) maladaptive emotion regulation, and 3) need for reassurance and theatrical acting. Although all three core features contribute to the disorder, the dysfunctions in their emotion processes have the most impact, leading to interpersonal conflicts, and risk behaviours (Kraus & Reynolds, 2001). While in most personality disorders, emotional dysregulation and impulsivity were identified as causal factor for emotional shifts, these processes could not be related to HPD (Garofalo et al., 2018). Rather, studies showed positive associations with emotional dysfunctions of affect modulation, describing an inability to adapt one's reaction to the meaning of a situation (Linden, 2006). An approach that discusses different types of emotional dysfunctions is emotion-focused therapy (EFT) (Goldman & Greenberg, 2015). EFT distinguishes different types of dysfunctional emotion processes namely, primary maladaptive, secondary reactive and instrumental emotions. While all three dysfunctions might contribute to HPD, only instrumental emotions are discussed in the framework of this paper. Instrumental emotions or emotional manipulation, that is, using one's emotions to control others and their actions, play a central role in the characteristics of HPD. Most often expressions of instrumental emotions include making up stories, gaslighting and playing with other's feelings, meaning to manipulate people's sense of reality (Goldman & Greenberg, 2015).

Specifically, hysterically crying, threatening to kill oneself, and dramatizing minor conflicts, are used expressions of histrionics as a product of fear. However, these extreme reactions most often do not match to the situation experienced (French & Shrestha, 2020). The reason for such emotional expressions were explored in a study about borderline personality disorder. There, it was found that instrumental emotions were used to protect them from feelings of fear or insecurities (Láng, 2015). To illustrate, BPD patients used emotional manipulation to receive compassion from others to cope with their feelings of fear. In congruence, EFT proposes that emotional dysfunctions like instrumental emotions are produced by feelings of fear, specifically fear of abandonment (Goldman & Greenberg, 2015). Respectively, as fear (of abandonment) plays an essential role in HPD, we suggest an existent relation between HPD and emotional manipulation.

### **The Mediating Role of Anxious Attachment**

One factor, which often elicits fear in people with histrionic characteristics, is abandonment. Fear of abandonment describes intense feelings of anxiety concerning loneliness, meaning to lose bonds or relationships (Palihawadana et al., 2019). This fear is thought to be a product of insecure attachment.

Generally, attachment can be described as an emotional bond that we build with other people to feel interconnected and safe (Colmer et al., 2011). The term attachment was first put into theory by Bowlby (1985), in which he described how different attachment styles influence human functioning. More precisely, Bowlby (1985) assumed that children learn and copy the attachment patterns of their care figures, which in turn influence their own relations with others.

As not all children are treated with love and care, differences in attachment styles can be detected. While people with secure attachment have a high ability to form new relationships and empathize with others, insecure attachments are characterized by the inability to build and maintain relationships (Crawford, et al., 2007). Two styles of insecure attachment are most common, the avoidant and the anxious attachment. While the avoidant attachment defines escaping or distancing from close relations, anxious attachment is expressed by clingy behaviours. Although most people engage, to some degree, in anxious or avoidant behaviours, the extremes of both, result in atypical social behaviours and in its extremes, in personality disorders (Sheinbaum et al., 2015).

Specifically, Cluster B personality disorders, could be associated with anxious attachment (Levy et al., 2015). For instance, studies into HPD show that certain behaviours, like attention-seeking, manipulateness, and excessive engagement in close relationships, may stem from the fear and insecurity to be neglected by others (Timmerman & Emmelkamp, 2006). Paradoxically, these extreme behaviours are often the reason for interpersonal conflicts, reinforcing a vicious cycle of anxiety states and maladaptive coping strategies, like emotional manipulation (Láng, 2015). Due to this, we suggest that the tendency to use emotional manipulateness, is manifested and caused by the histrionics anxiety of abandonment.

### **The Mediating Role of Need Frustration**

Another underlying mechanism possibly reinforcing the usage of emotional manipulation in people with histrionic characteristics is basic need frustration (BNF). Simply spoken, basic need frustration describes a process hampering individuals to psychologically grow and develop. Consequently, in its extremes, BNF can predict several forms of psychopathology, making the concept transdiagnostic (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Therefore, we suggest that need frustration plays a central underlying role in HPD and its relations with other variables.

Basic need frustration is part of self-determination theory (SDT) and describes three basic psychological needs, affecting humans' ability to psychologically grow and function (Ryan & Deci, 2017). These three needs consist of (1) *Competence*, referring to the control humans have about themselves, their environment, and their abilities. In essence humans need challenges and the experience of proficiency to feel competent, (2) *Autonomy*, including the feeling of psychological freedom and volition of one's own life, that is, experiencing to be able to make one's own choices and decisions, and (3) *Relatedness*, describing the desire to be valued and appreciated by others (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

SDT proposes that the three basic psychological needs are facilitated or deliberated by certain factors in human's life (Tindall & Curtis, 2019). Such factors include heritability or one's culture, but most importantly social resources. In environments where social resources fulfill the basic psychological needs, humans psychologically grow and develop, directly affecting achievement and performance as well as mental and subjective health. In contrast, in environments where inadequate input is provided (e.g., no challenge, no experience of competence or love) basic needs are left unsatisfied or frustrated, hindering psychological well-being and facilitating psychopathologies (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Concerning HPD, we suggest that histrionic features may be especially related to the experience of autonomy and relatedness frustration. Regarding autonomy frustration, research was able to relate certain behavioural characteristics of personality disorders to the concept (Fousiani et al., 2016; Miano et al., 2017). Characteristics that were most likely associated with autonomy frustration are impulsive and irrational behaviours like substance abuse, emotional outbursts, or aggressions (Fousiani et al., 2016). Although impulsivity could not be related to HPD, emotional outbursts and irrational behaviours were associable with their tendency to engage in risk behaviours (Fossati et al., 2007). Risk behaviours refer to seek and engage in dangerous and risky

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situations, like balancing on railway tracks to increase the feeling of adrenaline. Additionally, also self-harming behaviours, such as substance abuse or sexual intercourse without protection, are common patterns associated with HPD (Fossati et al., 2007). As the expression of autonomy frustration strongly overlaps with certain characteristics of HPD, we suggest that people with histrionic characteristics are autonomously frustrated.

Moreover, frustration of relatedness might be explainable by the fragile self-image of HPD patients. Histrionics highly depend on the feedback and opinions of others, seeking constant reassurance and attention to reduce their fear of abandonment and neglect (Miano et al., 2017). However, relations are hard to maintain with individuals who excessively search for attention or manipulate others, possibly frustrating their desire to experience love and care from others (Miano et al., 2017). Further, while autonomy frustration triggers anti-social behaviours, relatedness frustration elicits internal anxiety and insecurity, which might relate to the histrionics constant fear experience (Fousiani et al., 2016).

### **Present Research**

Based on the theoretical framework of attachment and self-determination theory, the present research tries to investigate the underlying role of anxious attachment and need frustration on the relation of histrionic features and emotional manipulation.

In line with Emotion-Focused therapy, we suggest that histrionic features relate to the use of instrumental emotions, that is, manipulating or using others for their own benefit (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, the relation between histrionic features and emotional manipulation, may be explained by their fear of abandonment, in short, their anxious attachment (Hypothesis 2a). Additionally, we propose that the frustrated desire to receive love and care from others (relatedness) (2b) and/or the frustration of perceiving one's life and decisions as forced (autonomy) (2c) explain the relation of histrionic features and emotional manipulation.

Finally, we suggest, that the anxious attachment experienced, results in increasing frustrations of relatedness and autonomy, which in turn explain the relation of histrionic features and emotional manipulation (H3).



## Methods

### Design and Procedure:

In this study, a cross-sectional design was adopted. Therefore, an online survey was created in Qualtrics and spread over social media (Whatsapp, Instagram etc.). When opening the study, participants were presented with background information about the study and an informed consent (Appendix). By signing this consent, participants confirmed their volitional participation in the study and that their data was treated confidential. Subsequently, participants were faced with questions regarding their gender, age, nationality, and English-level. Followed by four scales measuring HPD features, emotional manipulation, anxious attachment and need frustration.

### Participants

To participate in this study, participants had to be 18 years or older. In total 157 participants filled out the study, from which 28 were excluded due to incompleteness. The remaining participants included 96 females, 31 males and 2 non-binary individuals. Age of the participants varied from 18 to 65 ( $M = 28.72$ ;  $SD = 12.94$ ). Further, participants' nationality was divided into 62.8% Germans, 3.1% Dutch, 17.1% other EU countries and 17.1% of non-Eu countries. Finally, the sample also differed in their English levels, 11.6% participants perceived their ability to be “basic”, 23.3% indicated to have an “intermediate” English level, 27.9% an “advanced” and 37.2% “proficiency” skills.

### Materials

#### *Histrionic Personality Disorder*

To assess histrionic features, the Brief Histrionic Personality Scale (BHPS) (Ferguson & Negy, 2014) was used. The scale includes 36 items, measuring two subscales: *Attention-seeking*, focusing on the longing for attention (18 items; e.g., “I like to be the centre of attention”) and *Seductiveness*, measuring flirting and desirability (18 items; e.g., “I like it when I know someone desires me sexually”). Responses to the items were assessed on a 4-point Likert scale (4 = “Always true” to 1 = “Never true”). Ten items needed to be reverse scored, meaning that high scores indicate a higher accordance with HPD. With respect to this sample, BHPS showed good reliability ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

#### *Anxious Attachment*

To measure anxious attachment, the revised version of the Experience in Close relationships scale (ECR-M16) was used (Lo et al., 2009). In comparison to the original version

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(ECR-12), the ECR-M16 does not only focus on attachment in intimate relations but includes relations with friends and families. Only the anxious attachment subscale was used assessing worrying about abandonment (8 items; e.g., “I worry a fair amount about losing people with whom I feel close with”). Answers to the items were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = “Totally disagree” to 7 = “Totally agree”. High scores on the ECR-M16, represent higher engagement in anxious attachment behaviours. In this sample good internal reliability was identified for the ECR-M16 ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

### ***Emotional Manipulation***

Regarding the measure of emotional manipulation, the subscale of Emotional manipulation ability of the MEOS of Hyde and Grieve (2018) was applied. On this scale, 10 items that focus on the ability to control others’ emotions (e.g., “I know how to embarrass someone, to stop them behaving in a particular way”) were assessed. Scores of the EMS were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, varying from 1 “Strongly disagree” to 5 “Strongly agree”, meaning that high scores represent high emotional manipulation ability. In this study, the EMS showed good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

### ***Need Frustration***

To evaluate need frustration, the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Need Frustration scale (BPNSNF) was used (Chen et al., 2015). The BPNSNF includes satisfaction and frustration scales for every need (relatedness, autonomy and competence). However, for the further process of this paper only the frustration scales were used. The subscale of autonomy frustration consists of four items and focuses on feeling forced or pressured into decisions throughout daily life (e.g., “I do the things I do everyday because I have to, not because I want to”). The frustration of relatedness scale concentrates on feelings of exclusion through others (e.g., “The people I spend time with don’t like me”) summed up in four items. Lastly, frustration of competence focuses on feeling in control over one’s performances and abilities (e.g. “I feel disappointed with many of my performances”), questioned in four items. The scales are rated on a 5-Likert scale, in which high scores indicate high frustration. For the subscales of autonomy, relatedness and competence good reliability was found for this sample ( $\alpha = .82$ ;  $\alpha = .84$ ;  $\alpha = .90$ ).

### **Plan of Analysis**

In order to analyze the proposed hypothesis, IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 and PROCESS macro for SPSS were used. Before testing the main

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hypothesis, descriptive statistics, reliability indices and intercorrelations were computed for all studied variables. Additionally, correlation analyses and independent t-test analyses were performed, checking for potential relations between study and background variables of age and gender. Further, to examine hypothesis 1, a regression analysis was performed with histrionic features as the predictor and emotional manipulation as the outcome variable. To test hypotheses 2 and 3, PROCESS macro was used for simple and serial mediations (Hayes' 2013; models 4 & 6). Three simple mediations were conducted, each testing the mediating effects of, anxious attachment, autonomy frustration and frustration of relatedness, on the relation of HPD features (predictor variable) and emotional manipulation (outcome variable). For the serial mediation, all three mediators were tested on the relation between HPD and emotional manipulation. By running these analyses, total and direct effects of the predictor variable (HPD) on the criterion variable (emotional manipulation) as well as indirect effect through the different mediator variables were analyzed. In both mediation models, a confidence interval of 95% was used.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

When testing for assumptions, preliminary results of the Kolmogorov Smirnov and the Shapiro-Wilke test implied violation of normality for all variables ( $p > .05$ ). In line with that were also the histograms, showing a moderately skewness to the left for all study variables. Due to the violation of assumptions, bootstrapping was performed in further analysis. To get a deeper insight into the different variables presented in this study, means, standard deviations and correlations were computed. For the distinct study variables, an overall positive correlation pattern could be identified. An exception, however, was found between the variables of autonomy frustration, HPD characteristics and emotional manipulation, showing insignificant correlations. Moreover, higher levels in anxious attachment and relatedness frustration could be related to higher levels of emotional manipulation (dependent variable) (see Table 1).

**Table 1.***Descriptivism and Correlations between the different Study Variables.*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. HPD	75.57	10.27	-				
2. Anxious Attachment	4.16	1.30	.30**	-			
3. Emotional Manipulation	2.31	.99	.36**	.26**	-		
4. Autonomy Frustration	12.13	3.69	.11	.31**	.04	-	
5. Relatedness Frustration	8.10	3.66	.22*	.44**	.27**	.42**	-

*Note.* \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$ .

Further, before hypothesis testing was performed, possible confounding effects on gender and age were tested on all study variables. Therefore, independent t-tests were conducted, treating gender as the grouping and the others as independent variables. Further, for age, correlations with the other study variables were conducted. Outcomes illustrated significant effects for gender on emotional manipulation. Men scored higher in emotional manipulation ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ;  $t(125) = 47.703$ ,  $p = .02$ ) than women ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = .96$ ). Moreover, no significant relation of age on the other study variables could be found. As results did not demonstrate great differences among study variables, upcoming analysis will not be controlled for age and gender.

## Hypothesis Testing

### *Histrionic Features as Predictor for Emotional Manipulation*

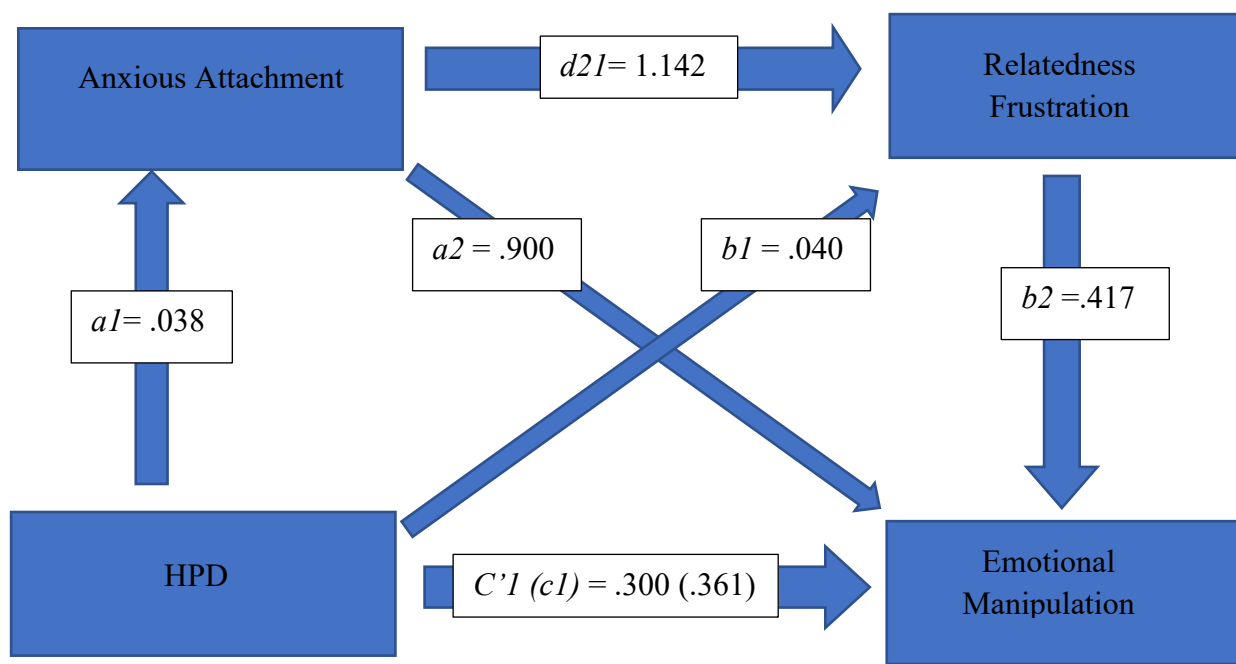
Concerning the first hypothesis, we investigated whether participants who score high in HPD, also score high in emotional manipulation. In line with our first hypothesis, the regression model showed a significant relation between HPD and emotional manipulation ( $B = .300$ ,  $F(1,127) = 13.73$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .098$ ).

### *Simple and Serial Mediation Model*

Further, to test if anxious attachment, autonomy, and relatedness frustration have a mediating effect on the relation between HPD characteristics and emotional manipulation, three simple mediation analyses were applied. Regarding the mediators of anxious attachment ( $B = .051$ ; 95% CI [.001, .113]) and frustration of relatedness ( $B = .044$ ; 95% CI [.001, .114]), small significant mediating effects could be found, proving hypothesis 2a) and 2b). However, the indirect effect of autonomy frustration turned out to be non-significant ( $B = .000$ ; 95% CI [-.025, .033]), and therefore was not included in the further serial mediation analyses.

**Figure 2.**

*Serial Mediation Model of the Mediators Anxious Attachment and Relatedness Frustration on the Relation of Histrionic Features and Emotional Manipulation.*



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For the serial mediation analysis, results demonstrated a significant total effect between histrionic features and emotional manipulation ( $c'1 = .361, p < .001$ ). This effect also remained significant after adding the two mediators ( $C'1 = .300, p > .05$ ). Moreover, the total indirect effect, counting in all indirect effects (i.e.  $a1*a2 + b1*b2 + a1*d21*b2$ ), showed a small positive significant effect ( $B = .066; 95\% \text{ CI } [.009, .150]$ ). Nevertheless, when controlling for the hypothesized serial mediation ( $a1d21b2$ ), the indirect effect turned in-significant ( $B = .018, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.005, .047]$ ). Thus, hypothesis 3, suggesting that the relation of histrionic features and emotional manipulation is mediated by anxious attachment and frustration of relatedness, needs to be rejected.

### Discussion

Despite its expansive history, research into HPD is rarely conducted, affecting knowledge about its etiological and maintaining factors (Novais et al., 2015). This study particularly focused on the role of emotional manipulation in the presence of histrionic characteristics. Furthermore, we aimed to investigate possible underlying mechanisms of need frustration and anxious attachment. Based on the frameworks of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1985), it was hypothesized that a positive relation between HPD and emotional manipulation can be explained by (1) the frustrated desire to perceive genuine love and care (relatedness frustration); (2) autonomy frustration, describing the frustrated experience of psychological freedom and choice of action and (3) anxious attachment patterns, that is, fearing to be abandoned by others (Colmer et al., 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This study could shed some light on transdiagnostic processes underlying histrionic features, which may give inspiration for future research.

### HPD and Emotional Manipulation

Concerning, the first hypothesis, study outcomes illustrate a positive significant relation between histrionic features and emotional manipulation, meaning that emotional manipulative tendencies are present in histrionic characters. These findings correspond with EFT, which relates dysfunctional emotions, (i.e., emotional manipulation), to different psychopathologies (Goldman & Greenberg, 2015). In EFT, emotions are seen as motivators, stimulating human's action tendencies (Johnson, 2012). Therefore, behind every action tendency one of the six basic emotions can be identified. According to Goldman and Greenberg (2015) dysfunctional usage of emotions

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is often elicited by the basic emotion of fear. As HPD is characterized by experiencing extreme insecurities and fears, it is of no surprise that these fears are related to emotional manipulation.

### **Anxious Attachment and Frustration of Relatedness**

Furthermore, based on SDT and attachment theory, it was expected that anxious attachment and the frustrated desire to feel loved by others, reinforce the relation between histrionic features and emotional manipulation by compensating the feeling of fear (Bowlby, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). To test this, a simple and a serial mediation was conducted. Similarly, to previous research, results of the simple mediations supported our expectations.

Corresponding with our hypothesis, that emotional manipulation is a compensation for fear, is research about a defence mechanism called projection (Costa, 2017). Defence mechanisms are activated when unwanted feelings or thoughts are elicited, thus defending oneself from them. The mechanism of projection refers to projecting one's own feelings on to others. As histrionics, are likely to use gaslighting and dramatizations as strategy to project their feelings of fear/frustration on to others, the defence of projection seems to be applied (Costa, 2017).

Accordingly, it was expected that anxious attachment reinforces feelings of frustration, and in turn influence the relation of histrionic characteristics and emotional manipulation. However, while a positive relation between the mediators was shown, no mediating effect on the relation of HPD and emotional manipulation was found.

One explanation may be that feelings of fear do not necessarily result in the application of emotional manipulation. According to Wei et al. (2021) the different concepts of BNF are related to distinct interpersonal response styles. Interestingly, relatedness frustration was associated with two interpersonal response styles, the exploitable-subservient and the hostile-avoidant. While the exploitable-subservient response style defines manipulating behaviours, for instance gaslighting, the hostile-avoidant response refers to detaching from others, by cutting off relations. Although both response styles related to frustration of relatedness, the hostile-avoidant response style was more strongly associated (Wei et al., 2021). Concerning HPD, hostile-avoidant behaviours, are found when feelings of insecurity are elicited. Therefore, not only emotional manipulation seems to be a compensating strategy, but also hostile-avoidant behaviours like withdrawing from or ending relationships. As the response styles were not only related to the concepts of need frustration but to the feelings caused by it, the interpersonal response styles were also related to attachment patterns. As both, relatedness frustration and anxious attachment cause the emotion of

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fear, hostile-avoidant behaviours are also associated with fear of abandonment (Wei et al., 2021). Therefore, instead of investigating anxious attachment and need frustration as two distinct concepts, it would be interesting to control for response styles caused by feelings of fear. Consequently, clearer results on the origins behind emotional manipulation may be identified.

Nevertheless, we do not know if participants in this study are more or less likely to use emotional manipulation compared to other response styles. Therefore, it must be considered that relatedness frustration and anxious attachment do not relate as strongly to emotional manipulation as expected. For instance, histrionic features also include narcissistic aspects; consequently, the desire for attention may not be a product of fear but of narcissism (Bakkevig & Karterud, 2010). This would mean that it might be possible to feel less relatedness frustration, by being convinced of one's own greatness, while still feeling the desire to seek attention (Sedikides et al., 2019).

### **Unexpected Findings: Autonomy Frustration**

While small mediating effects were found for anxious attachment and relatedness frustration, autonomy frustration was not related to histrionic features or emotional manipulation.

An explanation could be that to feel autonomously frustrated, people must be aware about their personal malfunctioning. However, research implied that individuals with personality disorders are limited in their self-awareness as they try to protect their fragile self-image (Schmidt, 2021). Rather, they tend to reject or deny any information that might disturb their self-perception (Schmidt, 2021). In line with that is an approach introduced in SDT, called introjected avoidance (Assor et al., 2009). Introjected avoidance refers to actions performed to prevent feeling unworthy, for instance manipulating others to avoid feeling guilty. Accordingly, although experiencing autonomy frustration, histrionic individuals may avoid integrating negative feedback to prevent feeling unworthy, affecting their subjective awareness of their problems (Assor et al., 2009; Schmidt, 2021).

Nonetheless, it also must be considered that autonomy frustration is not related to histrionic characteristics and emotional manipulation. In this study, most knowledge about autonomy frustration was derived from research specifying on borderline. However, the process related to autonomy frustration in BPD is emotional dysregulation (Smith & South, 2020). Emotional dysregulation refers to experiencing emotions not as volitional but as overwhelming, leading to suppression or emotional outbursts (Benita, 2020). However, emotional manipulation is a purposeful strategy targeted to a specific person, contradicting the concept of emotional



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dysregulation (Benita, 2020). Further, in contrast to BPD, to our knowledge, there is no evidence of relating different forms of emotional dysregulation to histrionic characteristics. Therefore, autonomy frustration may not be present in HPD (Benita, 2020). For future studies it would be interesting, to establish a clearer picture of emotional regulation processes like emotional manipulation, to identify more subtle forms of such processes and its consequences.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although some findings of this study confirm previous research on HPD, interpretations must be treated with caution. First, this study had a cross-sectional design. Consequently, it is not possible to assess if histrionic features cause emotional manipulation or vice versa. Future experimental studies could therefore aim to investigate causality and directionality between the two variables, by comparing non-clinical and clinical populations, in their response styles. Further, mediating factors like fear of abandonment and relatedness frustration could be assessed at different time points in life, as the concepts may depend on periods of peer pressure and social approval. Secondly, self-report measures were used in this study, which means that subjectivity while filling out the questionnaires was possibly high, impacting the generalizability of the study (Demetriou et al., 2015). Future research could counter this argument by implementing semi-structured interviews, assessing participants' scores in a more objective way. Finally, this study was applied to a non-clinical population. Consequently, assumptions can only be drawn for non-clinical histrionic features, limiting findings in the clinical field.

### **Clinical Implications**

Generally, treatment opportunities for HPD are not well researched. Contrasting to borderline, no specific treatment guidelines can be found for HPD (NICE, 2022). Therefore, therapists focus on treatment guidelines for personality disorders, possibly missing the underlying mechanisms of HPD. Nevertheless, psychodynamic therapy is found to be effective (Köse & Erbaş, 2020). In psychodynamic therapy, focus is set on the fears, inner conflicts, and insecurities to reduce emotional shifts (French & Shrestha, 2020). Concerning our findings, therapeutic approaches should consider reinforcing factors of emotional manipulation, to change fear perception in close relations. Thus, treatment approaches like Emotion Focused Therapy, valuing the experience of emotions, should be seen as an opportunity to complement psychodynamic therapy for HPD (Goldman & Greenberg, 2015). Finally, it would be beneficial to integrate aims such as 'self-awareness' into therapy by integrating components of dialectical behavioural therapy

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(DBT). In DBT, adaptive coping strategies regarding feelings of fear are learned and self-awareness is increased by meditation.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, results of this study confirm the relation between histrionic features and emotional manipulation, while mediating effects relatedness frustration and anxious attachment remain questionable. Autonomy frustration was not related to either, histrionic features or emotional manipulation. For future studies examining underlying mechanisms, it would be interesting to get a closer insight into the response styles, observing more personal and ingrained characteristics of HPD. Additionally, more research concerning emotional regulation processes should be applied as it is essential to also understand subtle forms of emotional (dys)regulation, offering the opportunity to gain insight into their origins. Finally, this study tried to shed light on potential underlying mechanisms in HPD, through this, implications for future research and new treatment opportunities were given, establishing new insights into the disorder.

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## **Appendix**

### **Consent and Information Sheet**

#### **Participant information letter**

#### **Research on the underlying mechanisms of Histrionic personality disorder**

Dear participants,

First of all, an incredible thanks for your possible participation in this research!

#### **What it is about**

In the context of my Master Thesis in the department Clinical Psychology at Utrecht University, I study the role of emotion regulation and basic need frustration regarding the symptomatology of the Histrionic personality disorder. Therefore, the underlying role of feelings of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and attachment are taken into account. As knowledge about the underlying mechanisms of Histrionic personality disorder is lacking, research can be very informative to further theoretical development and psychological treatment opportunities. The data of this research is used for a Master thesis.

#### **How the data is collected and what we invite you to do**

For the procedure of this research, I will first ask some background information about gender, age, English level, and nationality. Furthermore, I ask you to fill in a couple of questionnaires concerning features of Histrionic personality disorder; attachment patterns; emotional manipulation and feelings of frustrated autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Participation will take about 10-15 minutes.

#### **Possible advantages or disadvantages**

Filling in these questionnaires is not considered to be burdensome or emotionally stressful. In case the questions do evoke unpleasant feelings, or you have questions about your participation, please do not hesitate to contact me via email (see below ).

#### **Voluntary participation**

## HISTRIONIC FEATURES & ITS UNDERLYING MECHANISMS

Participation in this study is voluntary and can be stopped at any time, without giving reasoning. The data that was collected up to that point may be used unless you explicitly state otherwise.

**Personal data & Privacy** The data captured in this study will be treated as confidential and will be anonymized in accordance with the highest safety regulations. Only me, as the researcher of this study has access to the data. The little personal information gathered (e.g., age, gender, ...) cannot be traced back to you as a person. Data will be stored for at least 10 years in accordance with the guidelines provided by the VSNU Association of Universities in the Netherlands ([www.vsnu.nl](http://www.vsnu.nl)). For more information about privacy we refer to the website the Authority for Personal Data: <https://autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl/nl/onderwerpen/avg-europese-privacywetgeving>

### **Independent contact and complaints officer**

If you have an official complaint about the study, you can contact me (see below), or you can send an email to the complaints officer at [klachtenfunctionaris-fetsowet@uu.nl](mailto:klachtenfunctionaris-fetsowet@uu.nl) . If, after reading this information letter, you decide to take part in the research, I kindly ask you to give your consent below.

With kind regards, Leonie Böhm, student conducting this research ([l.bohm@students.uu.nl](mailto:l.bohm@students.uu.nl))

Bart Neyrinck, docent and supervisor of this research ([b.a.m.neyrinck@uu.nl](mailto:b.a.m.neyrinck@uu.nl))

Consent statement:

- I hereby declare that I am 18 years or older
- I hereby declare that I have read the information letter about “Research on the underlying mechanisms of Histrionic personality disorder” and that I am sufficiently informed and want to take part in this stud