

## Predictors of Social Estrangements

Sung, A., Geher, G., & Wice, M.

State University of New York at New Paltz

---

### ABSTRACT

Human connection plays a significant role in an individual's life. Belonging is one of the key components of living a successful life. With that being said, humans are programmed to prevent being exploited by others. This study examines what characteristics an individual may have that lead to having a high number of social estrangements. The hypothesis of this study was that if impulsivity, borderline tendencies, risk-taking, and fast life history strategy were all present in an individual's personality, then this would lead to a higher number of estrangements in that individual's life. Using a sample of 413 participants, it was found that the hypothesis was partially supported. The more borderline tendencies someone had, the more estrangements he or she had in life.

### KEYWORDS

Psychology, Estrangements, Borderline Tendencies, Life History Theory

---

Estrangements, whether you are the one implementing them or you are the one receiving them, cause psychological harm. On the other hand, estrangements may provide a beneficial cutoff to someone who may be exploiting you but at the same time, can come with severe consequences when used too often in a small community (Geher et al., 2019). From an evolutionary perspective, humans are dependent on each other for survival, and social estrangements could potentially lead to death (Wesselmann, Nairne, & Williams, 2012).

Under ancestral conditions, humans lived in small-sized communities which consisted of people who were all familiar with one another and depended on each other for survival (De'Jesús, Cristo, Ruel, Kruchowy, Geher, Nolan, Santos, Wojszynski, Alijaj, DeBonis, Elyukin, Huppert, Maurer, Spackman, Villegas, Widrick, & Zezula, 2021). According to Dunbar (1992), these communities would consist of no more than 150 individuals. Under these conditions, estrangements from few individuals could result in catastrophic consequences.

Having a large number of estrangements can result in anger, worsened mood and lower levels of the four fundamental needs (belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence) (Hawkes, 2011). In severe cases, a large number of

---

AUTHOR NOTE: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Glenn Geher, Department of Psychology, SUNY New Paltz, 1 Hawk Dr., New Paltz, NY 12561, United States. Contact: [geherg@newpaltz.edu](mailto:geherg@newpaltz.edu).

estrangements can lead to pathological consequences such as substance and alcohol dependence. For people who face long-term estrangements, they tend to seek revenge as a way to gain control by exhibiting antisocial behavior (Rudert, Janke, & Greifeneder, 2020).

Studies have shown that individuals who score high in the Dark Triad (Narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) are more likely to be revenge-seeking (Geher et al., 2019). The Dark Triad is associated with low agreeableness and is marked by impulsivity, interpersonal problems, and alienation (Stead, Fekken, Kay, & McDermott, 2012). The characteristics of the Dark Triad aligns with the same characteristics that are predicted to be seen in individuals with a high number of estrangements. There is a perpetuating cycle that starts to occur. Those who score high on the Dark Triad are more likely to have a high number of estrangements and those with a high number of estrangements are likely to seek revenge and as stated before, revenge seeking is associated with the Dark Triad.

### Predictors of Estrangements

Estrangements do not appear out of nowhere. There are reasons why some people have more estrangements than others. Whether it may be rooted in previous trauma history or a current mental health diagnosis, associating the reasons behind estrangements can aid in deterring future estrangements and negative outcomes caused by social estrangements.

**Impulsivity.** Impulsivity is a generalization of behavior that can include actions that are often made with little thought and that often results in undesirable outcomes (Evenden, 1999). Chronic impulsive behavior can lead to mental disorders such as kleptomania, gambling and trichotillomania (Hollander & Rosen, 2000). Impulsivity can be present and required for “normal” behavior but the type of impulsivity that this study is focusing on impacts the individual in an unfavorable manner.

**Borderline Tendencies.** Borderline Personality Disorder is complex in nature, it is characterized by trouble maintaining interpersonal relationships, dichotomous thinking, self-destructive behavior, and trouble regulating emotions, etc. (Carlson, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2009). These traits are known as *borderline tendencies*. Previous research suggests that borderline tendencies are connected with significant problems in functioning and that identifying these tendencies is the first step in managing the associated issues (Taylor, James, Reeves, & Kistner, 2008). Oftentimes, borderline tendencies are present with other mental health disorders such as Bipolar 1 and 2, and PTSD. In a way, borderline tendencies can be seen as coping mechanisms for the individual. We’re still unsure about how borderline tendencies come to be but previous research finds that individuals with these traits are likely to have trauma history, which leads to these maladaptive behaviors (Lieb, Zanarini, Schmahl, Linehan, & Bohus, 2004). Borderline tendencies have shown to be associated with aversive behavior and typically require extensive mental health resources to be managed. It is hypothesized that the aversive behavior includes a large number of social estrangements.

**Risk-Taking.** Both positive and negative risk-taking can take place, similar to what was said before about impulsivity. It is difficult to distinguish what a healthy

amount of risk-taking looks like. There is a certain amount of risk that individuals take when we choose to trust others. On the other hand, there is also risk when considering cutting someone out of your life. Thus, this study explores the connection between risk-taking and estrangements.

**Life History Strategy.** *Life History Theory* refers to the way an organism uses survival and reproductive strategies. Depending on the organism's ecological condition, which is the way their genetic factors interact with the environment, the organism can develop a “fast” or “slow” *Life History strategy* (LHS) (see Figueredo et al., 2004; Stearns, 1976). LHS is developed through childhood, and living through unpredictable and harsh conditions as a child can result in fast life history strategies, which include, high number of sexual partners with little attachment, less parenting to offspring and early maturation (Csathó & Birkás, 2018). Fast life history strategies have been seen to have negative influences on interpersonal relationships and emotional functioning. The number of estrangements one has in their life is predicted to be dependent on the type of life history strategy the individual has. Due to the effects of fast life history strategies such as trouble maintaining close relationships, fast life history strategy is predicted to be related to a higher number of estrangements.

### Current Study

This study specifically examines how impulsivity, borderline tendencies, risk-taking, and life history strategy together, or separately, may be associated with a high number of estrangements in one's life. *Social estrangement* was defined in this study as “... when two people define one another as, essentially, “dead to one another”. They will not acknowledge one another's existence and they generally will plan to never speak to one another again.” Most of these variables have similar qualities within them such as all-or-nothing thinking, and a sense of unpredictability in one's life which leads to fast and harsh judgments and/or decisions being made. We predict that people will have a higher number of estrangements (dependent variable) if impulsivity, borderline tendencies, risk-taking, and fast life history strategy are present.

## METHOD

### Participants

An online survey was constructed and administered via Qualtrics. Of the 413 participants who started the survey, 392 finished the survey completely. The requirements for taking this study were to be 18 years or older and an English speaker. The youngest participant being 18 and the oldest being 56. The mean of the ages of participants was 21.96 ( $SD = 5.8$ ). Of the total number of participants, 93 were male, 302 were female, 4 preferred not to say and 14 selected “other”. Participants were also asked to select what race/ethnicity group they identify as and 299 identified as white, 48 identified as Hispanic or Latino, 20 identified as black or African

American, 1 identified as Native American or American Indian, 24 identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 21 identified as other.

**Table 1.** Age Breakdown

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	413	18	56	21.96	5.81

**Table 2.** Gender Breakdown

	Frequency
Male	93
Female	302
Prefer Not to Say	4
Other	14

**Table 3.** Racial and Ethnic Breakdown

	Frequency
White	299
Hispanic or Latino	48
Black or African American	20
Native American or American Indian	1
Asian/Pacific Islander	24
Other	21

### Measures and Procedures

The Qualtrics survey was distributed through a small state college campus, as well as online platforms (e.g., Facebook). Participants took the survey at their own convenience. General demographics were taken during the survey (gender, age, and ethnicity).

## RESULTS

This research examines if certain characteristics are significant predictors of the number of estrangements in one's life, specifically examining borderline tendencies, risk-taking, impulsivity and fast life history strategy. The analyses that were made included zero-order correlations among all variables as well as a regression analysis to see if other variables significantly predicted the number of estrangements in one's life. The variables were measured to see how strongly associated they were to the number of estrangements the individual has. Relevant means and standard deviations for gender, age and variables are found in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4. The number of estrangements in this sample had a mean of 3.99 ( $SD = 5.94$ ). Impulsivity had a mean of 20 ( $SD = 4.29$ ), borderline tendencies showed a mean of 18.16 ( $SD = 6.06$ ), risk-taking showed a mean of 17.75 ( $SD = 3.63$ ), and life history strategy showed a mean of 24.97 ( $SD = 4.10$ ). The highest number you could score for all variables except the number of estrangements was 35.

**Table 4.** Number of participants, means, and standard deviations for Impulsivity, Borderline Tendencies, Risk-Taking, Life History Strategy, and Estrangements

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Impulsivity	404	20	4.29
Borderline Tendencies	400	18.16	6.06
Risk-Taking	399	17.75	3.63
Life History Strategy	396	24.97	4.10
Estrangements	392	3.99	5.94

**Zero-Order Correlations between Number of Estrangements and Variables**

To examine if borderline tendencies, risk-taking, impulsivity and fast life history strategy predict a higher number of estrangements in an individual's life, zero order correlations among these variables were computed. Borderline tendencies was positively associated with a higher number of estrangements ( $r(392) = .20, p < .05$ ). Meanwhile, life history strategy, risk-taking, and impulsivity did not show any significance in being related to the number of estrangements in one's life.

**Table 5.** Zero-Order Correlations among Borderline Tendencies, Risk-Taking, Impulsivity and Life History Strategy

	Estrangements	Risk-Taking	Impulsivity	Borderline Tendencies	Life History Strategy
Estrangements	-	-	-	-	-
Risk-Taking	.02	-	-	-	-
Impulsivity	.08	.23	-	-	-
Borderline Tendencies	.20*	.09	.36	-	-
Life History Strategy	-.07	.29	.04	-.24	-

\*  $p < 0.5$

**Multiple Regression between Variables**

A multiple regression was conducted to explore the variance in estrangements due to borderline tendencies, risk-taking, impulsivity and fast life history strategy. As seen on table 2, a significant amount of variability was accounted for by this set of borderline tendencies, risk-taking, life history strategy and impulsivity ( $R^2 = .039, F(4, 387) = 3.9, p < .05$ ). This means that around 3.9% of variability in estrangements can be accounted for by scores on borderline tendencies, risk-taking, life history strategy and impulsivity. Semi-squared partial correlations were assessed to touch on the variability in estrangements accounted for, separately, by borderline tendencies, risk-taking, life history strategy and impulsivity. As seen on Table 2, borderline tendencies considers a significant amount of variability in estrangements ( $sr^2 = .03, p < .05$ ), while risk-taking, life history strategy and impulsivity does not account for a significant amount of variability in estrangements. These findings suggest that borderline tendencies are significantly predictive of a higher number of estrangements in one's life and that risk-taking, life history strategy, and impulsivity are not.

**Table 6.** Multiple Regression Predicting Estrangements from Borderline Tendencies, Risk-Taking, Impulsivity and Life History Strategy

	b	B	$s^2$
Impulsivity	.02	.01	.00
Borderline Tendencies	.19	.19	.03*
Life History Strategy	-.03	-.02	-.00
Risk-Taking	.01	.00	.00

$R^2 = 3.9^*$ ;  $F(4, 387) = 3.94$

\*  $p < .05$

## DISCUSSION

The point of this research was to examine if borderline tendencies, impulsivity, risk-taking, and life history strategy predict a higher number of estrangements in one's life. The basic hypothesis that borderline tendencies predicts a higher number of estrangements was supported. With that being stated, risk-taking, impulsivity, and life history strategy showed no significance in predicting the number of estrangements. Future research can examine how these variables are connected, or, perhaps, disconnected to estrangements. We may be seeing these results due to the fact that borderline tendencies include black-and-white thinking and idealization and devaluation which may account for the number of estrangements associated with borderline tendencies. Although risk-taking and impulsivity are also associated with borderline tendencies, they alone may not cause cut offs or estrangements.

This study supports research that has been previously done stating that adverse psychological and social factors are connected with a high number of estrangements (Geher et al., 2019). Estrangements may come about due to underlying psychological adversity, such as previous trauma, which is common in Borderline Personality Disorders or the needs of that individual not being met. It can be seen as a harmful coping mechanism for those who have trouble with interpersonal relationships and regulating their emotions. On the flip side, being estranged from many people and feeling like you don't belong can heighten maladaptive behaviors. In certain cases, estrangements can lead to severe mental health consequences.

### Therapeutic Implications

Estrangements could be implemented in two ways: Being estranged from other people or being the one to *initiate* the estrangements. Both are damaging to a person's well-being. Due to the possible severe consequences associated with social estrangements, identifying motivators of estrangements and triggers can be useful in therapy. Targeting these characteristics can help professionals better understand the underlying causes of estrangements and can help break down the reasonings for such decisions. From there, the client and therapist can explore ways to help cope with the issues at hand. Doing so allows professionals to be proactive with their clients and hopefully work through problematic behaviors to decrease the likelihood of a

mental health diagnosis. Some characteristics that were investigated in this study are strongly tied to past trauma history. This brings up the chicken-or-the-egg dilemma. Do mental health issues cause more estrangements or do estrangements lead to mental health issues? Regardless of which comes first, the outcome, to put it simply, is bad. Once estrangements hit a certain severity, intervention is likely to be needed in order to create meaningful relationships and the skills needed to thrive in life.

### Limitations

There are limitations to consider when analyzing this study. First, the demographic was not amply diverse. Most participants were college students from a small college campus. This problem could have influenced the results due to the age range that was gathered in the sample. Having the mean age of 21 excludes older individuals and it may be possible that the number of estrangements an individual has increases later on in life. Another issue within the demographics of this study is that the majority of participants are female, leaving us to understand little of the number of estrangements in other gender identifying individuals. In addition to the limitations mentioned already, this study cannot be generalized to other racial groups and cultures because of the fact that the participants were primarily white.

When recruiting participants for this study, it was stated that “The goal of this study is to see if certain characteristics can predict the number of estrangements an individual has.” Although results were anonymous, speaking about one’s own estrangement history may have deterred individuals from participating in this study. It is possible that people who may have decided not to participate could have influenced the results.

### Future Research

While there are studies on estrangements, more could be understood about what leads to a higher number of estrangements, especially given the many adverse consequences that are known to be associated with estrangements (Geher et al., 2019). Further research should examine which characteristics connected with borderline tendencies are most able to predict a large number of estrangements. The study should specifically see if black-and-white thinking and idealization and devaluation are responsible for higher numbers of estrangements.

## BOTTOM LINE

From previous research, we realize that estrangements are known to be correlated with adverse psychological outcomes. A high number of estrangements typically does not come out of nowhere. Figuring out the underlying causes of estrangements can be a preventative measure for future mental health diagnoses. This study, as well as future studies on what triggers a high number of estrangements can benefit society as a whole as well as individuals on a smaller scale, leading them to live happier lives. Future research is needed to further look into the source of

estrangements and how we are able to overcome this issue to build a community and have stronger connections with one another.

REFERENCES

- Carlson, E. A., Egeland, B., & Sroufe, L. A. (2009). A prospective investigation of the development of borderline personality symptoms. *Development and Psychopathology*, 21(4), 1311-1334. doi:10.1017/s0954579409990174
- Csathó, Á., & Birkás, B. (2018). Early-Life Stressors, Personality Development, and Fast Life Strategies: An Evolutionary Perspective on Malevolent Personality Features. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 305. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00305>
- Evenden, J. L. (1999). Varieties of impulsivity. *Psychopharmacology*, 146(4), 348-361. doi:10.1007/pl00005481
- Figueredo, A. J., Vásquez, G., Brumbach, B. H., & Schneider, S. M. R. (2004). The heritability of life history strategy: the K-factor, covitality, and personality *Social Biology*, 51(3-4), 121-143.
- Geher, G., Rolon, V., Holler, R., Baroni, A., Gleason, M., Nitza, E., Sullivan, G., Thomson, G., Di Santo, J. M. (2019). You're dead to me! The evolutionary psychology of social estrangements and social transgressions. *Current Psychology*. doi:10.1007/s12144-019-00381-z
- De'Jesús, A. R., Cristo, M., Ruel, M., Kruchowy, D., Geher, G., Nolan, K., Santos, A., Wojszynski, C., Alijaj, N., DeBonis, A., Elyukin, N., Huppert, S., Maurer, E., Spackman, B. C., Villegas, A., Widrick, K., & Zezula, V. (2021). Betrayal, Outrage, Guilt, and Forgiveness: The Four Horsemen of the Human Social-Emotional Experience. *EvoS Journal: The Journal of the Evolutionary Studies Consortium*, 9(1), 1-13.
- Hawkes, C. L. (2011). *Effects of Imagined Social Rejection and Acceptance across Varying Relationships*. [Undergraduate Honors Thesis]. Paper 12. <https://dc.etsu.edu/honors/12>
- Hailwood, S. (2013). Estrangement, Nature and 'the Flesh'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 17(1), 71-85. doi:10.1007/s10677-013-9468-6
- Hollander, E., & Rosen, J. (2000). Impulsivity. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 14(2\_suppl1). doi:10.1177/02698811000142s106
- Lieb, K., Zanarini, M. C., Schmahl, C., Linehan, M. M., & Bohus, M. (2004). Borderline personality disorder. *The Lancet*, 364(9432), 453-461. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(04)16770-6
- Rudert, S. C., Janke, S., & Greifeneder, R. (2020). The experience of ostracism over the adult life span. *Developmental Psychology*, 56(10), 1999-2012. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001096>
- Stead, R., Fekken, C., Kay, A., & McDermott, K. (December 2012). Conceptualizing the Dark Triad of personality: Links to Social Symptomatology. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 53(8), 1023-1028. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2012.07.021>
- Stearns, S. C. (1976). Life-history tactics: a review of the ideas. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, 51(1), 3-47.
- Stickley, A., & Koyanagi, A. (2016). Loneliness, common mental disorders and suicidal behavior: Findings from a general population survey. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 197, 81-87. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2016.02.054

- Taylor, J., James, L. M., Reeves, M. D., & Kistner, J. A. (2008). Borderline Personality Traits are Associated with Poor Clinical and Psychosocial Functioning in Delinquent Boys. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, 31(2), 94-103. doi:10.1007/s10862-008-9097-x
- Wesselmann, E. D., Nairne, J. S., & Williams, K. D. (2012). An evolutionary social psychological approach to studying the effects of ostracism. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, 6(3), 309-328. doi:10.1037/h0099249