

BEDSIDE STUFFED ANIMALS AND BORDERLINE PERSONALITY¹

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Summary.—We explored the relationship between psychiatric diagnosis and the presence of stuffed animals at the bedside in a population of adult female psychiatric inpatients. One of the authors made approximately weekly surveys of the wardrooms of adult psychiatric inpatients over twelve months for the presence of displayed stuffed animals. The observer was blind to the diagnosis of 80% of the patients, and the study or its hypothesis was not known to other physicians. The discharge diagnoses of patients displaying stuffed animals were recorded and compared with those of the ward population in general. Among 36 female patients who displayed stuffed animals in their rooms, Borderline Personality Disorder was diagnosed in 22 (61%) of these patients. Of 447 adult female patients admitted to the same unit over the same period, only 17% were noted to be diagnosed Borderline Personality Disorder. Stuffed animals as a bedside clinical clue may suggest evaluation for Borderline Personality Disorder.

The significance of the stuffed animal, particularly as a developmental transitional object, has been described in the psychodynamic and psychoanalytic literature (Abrams, 1988; Jaffe & French, 1986). The importance of stuffed animals for adult psychiatric inpatients, however, has not been systematically studied. Stern and Glick (1993) reported on three medical inpatients, and observed that an exploration of the meaning of bedside stuffed animals might lead to a better understanding of medically hospitalized adult patients if considered projectively. Arkema (1981) surveyed 45 borderline personality disordered outpatients and noted that each of them reported past and present use of transitional objects such as a blanket or stuffed animal. Because past work has not systematically evaluated inpatients who have stuffed animals, our study sought to explore the relationship between psychiatric diagnosis in adult psychiatric inpatients and the presence of stuffed animals at the bedside. We wished to explore (1) the diagnoses of these patients and (2) whether these patients differed from the general ward population.

Method.—Subjects were 447 adult female inpatients on one of two psychiatric wards at Walter Reed Army Medical Center during the period September 1993 to September 1994. Patients were active duty military personnel, dependents, and retirees between the ages of 18 and 80 years. One au-

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thor (LL), one of five attendings on the wards, made approximately weekly surveys of the wardrooms of adult inpatients for the presence of visible stuffed animals while patients were in group therapy. The surveyor was blind to the diagnoses of four-fifths of the patients. Hidden stuffed animals were not sought. Names were recorded and later matched with discharge diagnoses and demographics. Discharge diagnoses were established according to DSM-III-R criteria by residents supervised by board certified psychiatrists. Chart review was conducted for presence of psychological testing. Residents and attendings did not know of the study hypothesis, and most did not know of the study. *t* tests were used to compare the mean ages of the groups. For the most prevalent discharge diagnosis among female patients who displayed stuffed animals and for that diagnosis among the female ward population 95% confidence intervals were calculated.

Results.—Thirty-six women displayed stuffed animals in their living space. Ten were active duty, and the rest dependents. Mean age \pm *SD* of the 36 women was 32.3 ± 9 yr. Age range was 20 to 52 years. Borderline Personality Disorder was a discharge diagnosis in 23 (61%) of the patients with stuffed animals. There was no significant difference in age between the patients with or without the diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder. For patients with Borderline Personality Disorder, 13 had had psychological testing, all supporting that diagnosis. Comorbid diagnoses for patients so diagnosed were major depression ($n=8$ or 35%), alcohol abuse or dependence ($n=4$ or 17%), Posttraumatic Stress Disorder ($n=3$ or 13%), Anorexia Nervosa ($n=1$ or 4%), Bulimia Nervosa ($n=1$ or 4%), and Multiple Personality Disorder ($n=1$ or 4%). For the remaining 13 women with stuffed animals, the primary diagnoses were schizophrenia ($n=3$ or 23%), Bipolar I ($n=2$ or 15%), Major Depression ($n=5$ or 38%), Histrionic Personality Disorder ($n=1$ or 7%), Schizotypal Personality Disorder ($n=1$ or 7%), and Bulimia Nervosa ($n=1$ or 7%).

During the year, 72 (16%) of the 447 women admitted to the ward were given the diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder among their discharge diagnoses. The mean age for all the women (39 ± 12) was higher than that for the patients with stuffed animals, but because we did not have data on all women with stuffed animals we were unable to do *t* tests. Thirty-two percent of the entire ward population were given the diagnosis, but as we did not survey all patients, we cannot address how many borderline patients did not have stuffed animals. For the year, however, even if no other patients with Borderline Personality Disorder had stuffed animals, then at least 32% (23 of 72) of the female patients so diagnosed had stuffed animals. The 95% confidence levels for this diagnosis are between 43% and 76% for those female patients who displayed stuffed animals, but between 6% and 27% for the female ward population.

Discussion.—The results of this study suggest that Borderline Personality Disorder or another personality disorder is common among relatively young adult female psychiatric inpatients who display bedside stuffed animals. The likelihood of Borderline Personality Disorder among women with stuffed animals was higher than expected among this ward population. There are several methodological limitations of this study. Not all patients were accounted for by weekly surveys. It is possible that a disproportionate number of patients who did not have Borderline Personality Disorder may have been overlooked. Some animals may have been hidden, and some patients may have been discharged before discovery. We did not differentiate between gifts and animals brought to the hospital. Ideally, we would have records of all patients who did and did not have stuffed animals. It is possible that the author's hypothesis confounded the findings, that residents noticing stuffed animals might more easily make the diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder, but few knew of the survey late into the course, and after the survey was done, none knew the hypothesis. The finding that patients with Borderline Personality Disorder possess and display stuffed animals while hospitalized is not surprising. These patients typically have difficulty with attachment and separation. In crisis, they may turn in a pathological way to transitional objects (Arkema, 1981) to help manage the anxiety associated with difficulties in interpersonal relationships. In view of methodological limitations, it appears that Borderline Personality Disorder was prevalent among patients who displayed bedside stuffed animals and that their presence might serve as a clue in the diagnosis of hospitalized psychiatric inpatients. It would not substitute, or course, for psychometric tests or careful history.

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