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# Personal Identity and Narrativity in Borderline Personality Disorder: A Phenomenological Reconfiguration

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## Keywords

Borderline personality disorder · Narrative identity · Self disorders · Identity · Phenomenology

## Abstract

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a complex condition marked by heterogeneity. People with BPD have a profusion of symptoms spread across various levels of lived experience, such as identity, affectivity, and interpersonal relationships. Researchers and clinicians have often resorted to the structuring concept of Self to organize the fragmentation of their experience at the identity level. Notably, using the concept of the narrative self, Fuchs proposed to interpret BPD as a fragmentation of narrative identity. This interpretation of BPD, widely shared, has been challenged by Gold and Kyratsous, who have proposed a complementary understanding of the self through the idea of agency, and to which Schmidt and Fuchs in turn have countered. This article proposes to contribute to this discussion from a phenomenological perspective. First, we will briefly review the discussions around narrative interpretation of BPD. From the problems left unresolved by the discussion, we will then justify the necessity

to proceed with a stratification of the self from a phenomenology method. Third, from the thought of the Hungarian phenomenologist László Tengelyi, we will continue with an archaeology of the self, in three layers – self-institution, self-formation, and minimal self – integrating Schmidt and Fuchs' concepts of self, in addition to those of Gold and Kyratsous, but also, to a lesser extent, those of Dan Zahavi. Finally, we will proceed with a phenomenological reconfiguration of the experiences and manifestations associated with the identity axis of BPD.

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## Introduction

Anyone who examines the phenomenological experience of people with borderline personality disorder (BPD) is struck by the profusion of symptoms spread across various levels of lived experience, to the point that the distinguishing feature of this disorder appears to be heterogeneity [1]. The diagnostic criteria identified by the DSM-5 reflects the extent of the manifestations of BPD on those affected: a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal

relationships, identity disturbance, impulsivity, recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures or threats, or self-mutilating behavior, affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood, chronic feelings of emptiness, inappropriate, intense anger and difficulty controlling anger, frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment, stress-related paranoid ideation, or severe dissociative symptoms [2]. These symptoms, which can be grouped under the character of instability, are generally found distributed along three experiential axes: identity, affectivity, and interpersonal relationships [2]. Disorders at the level of identity, which is often considered the main axis of BPD [3–6], are for their part distributed in a multitude of self-experiences that exceed the enumeration proposed by the DSM: feelings of emptiness and nonexistence, shifting views of oneself, rapid changes in roles, values, goals, and relationships, no clear concept of self-development, feelings of painful incoherence, development of a “false self,” and symptoms of derealization and depersonalization [7, 8].

To account for this fragmentation of experience at the identity level, researchers and clinicians have often resorted to the structuring concept of “Self.” However, the capacity of such a concept to arrange together various symptoms is questionable insofar as the concept is given, implicitly and explicitly, diverse definitions [9]. Indeed, if one takes a look into the psychopathological literature related to disturbances of the self, one finds notions like minimal self, core self, narrative self, neuronal self, social self, etc., and it is not yet clear how (or even if) these different notions are meant to denote aspects of the same experience of being oneself. Therefore, among the many substantive debates in the BPD literature, one of them pits several philosophical conceptions of the self against each other to find the one that most adequately and comprehensively captures the lived experiences of people with this disorder. The concept of narrative self or identity, proposed by Fuchs [10], among others, to understand BPD, has generated one such discussion in the field of phenomenological psychiatry. The interpretation of BPD in terms of a self-narrative disorder has been challenged by Gold and Kyratsous [7], who have proposed a complementary understanding of the self through the idea of agency, that Schmidt and Fuchs [11] in turn have countered.

The present article proposes to contribute to this discussion through a phenomenological analysis of the self. We start with the idea that the notion of the “Self” should be articulated within the different phenomenological stratum of experience, ranging from the most basic and minimal stratum to the most socially constructed. Thus,

we will not propose a necessarily limited univocal conception of the self. On the contrary, we will suggest that a stratification of the self is essential in overcoming the limitations of a narrative interpretation of the self, thereby accounting for the fragmentation of the self in BPD. We will proceed in four steps. First, we will briefly review discussions surrounding narrative interpretations of BPD, describing the three proposed concepts of self and their respective criticisms. From the problems left unresolved by the discussion, we will proceed by justifying the necessity of a stratification of the self using phenomenological methods. Third, we will propose a three-tiered stratification of the self-self-institution, self-formation, and minimal self – inspired by the phenomenology of Tengelyi [12]. This stratification will integrate the concepts of self of Schmidt and Fuchs [11], of Gold and Kyratsous [7], but also, to a lesser extent, of Zahavi [13–15]. Finally, we will conclude with a phenomenological reconfiguration of self-experiences associated with the identity axis of BPD.

### Current Debates Surrounding Narrative Interpretations of BPD

Narrative identity can be defined as the internalized and evolving story of self that a person constructs to make sense of their life. The story behind narrative identity consists in a selective reconstruction of one’s personal past and anticipations of their future [16, 17] that provide human life with unity in time [18]. Narrative identity is a multidisciplinary concept that finds its roots in the 1980s in the writings of philosophers such as Ricoeur [19] and McAntyre [20], and psychologists. In the field of psychology, McAdams [17] was the first to propose a comprehensive theoretical model of narrative identity as a way to study the content and structural features of life stories. Indeed, McAdams’ concept of narrative identity, which has since evolved (e.g., [21, 22]), is one of the bases for much research on BPD. Among other things, these studies (e.g., [23–26]) offer an analysis of the stories produced by people with BPD, according to thematic elements (e.g., agency, communion fulfillment, etc.), structural features (e.g., narrative coherence) or explicit content [27]. These studies focus on the explicit narratives produced by people with BPD, while other studies, which are the focus of the present paper, look at the structures of self-experience that make storytelling possible in the first place. Identity as permanence in time is originally a philosophical problem (see Locke and [18, 28]) and namely concerns the common and shared experience of remaining the same

through time in spite of their constant evolution. At the theoretical level, it implies asking whether there is indeed something like a diachronic identity behind this sense of identity, and what criteria support this identity. According to narrative identity theory, the unity offered by a life story acts as philosophically convincing criteria for a person's diachronic identity [19]. The authors wonder if the identity instability suffered by people with BPD could be explained by a weakening of narrative identity and of the life unification that it would guarantee. The first interpretation of the sort was proposed by Fuchs [10] and has been widely shared and developed by several researchers [23, 29–33]. Despite its positive reception, it has been the subject of some criticism, such as that of Gold and Kyratsous [7]. Indeed, Gold and Kyratsous' [7] conception of the self as an "intrapersonal team reasoner" has been challenged by Schmidt and Fuchs [11], who have suggested that it relies on a narrative understanding of the self. In this first section, we propose to unpack the sequences and terms of this debate.

Fuchs [10] has interpreted BPD as a "fragmentation of the narrative self". This concept, which Fuchs borrowed from the philosophers Ricoeur [18], MacIntyre [20], and Carr [34], implies "a meaningful coherence of the personal past, present and future that is similar to the unity of a story that we are telling" [10]. Narrative identity is thus the kind of identity or permanence in time that comes from the unification of life and its threefold temporality (past, present, future) into a story. According to Fuchs [10], although stories are lived (enacted) before being told, we are nevertheless its coauthors. Narrative identity thus assumes "the capacity of the individual to integrate contradictory aspects and tendencies into a coherent, overarching sense and view of his or her self" [10]. Fuchs suggests that this capacity is at risk in people with BPD: their impulsivity and fractionation keep them in a present, to which they identify themselves, and prevent them from integrating the various past and future events of their lives. Each present is thus isolated from the temporal framework that gives life its coherence. The narrative self is therefore *fragmented*, leading to a range of disturbances in self-experience.

This interpretation of BPD was challenged by Gold and Kyratsous [7], who question both the narrative understanding of this disorder and more generally the narrative dimension of the self. To that effect, the authors borrow the distinction between *diachronic* and *episodic* selves from the philosopher Strawson [35]. People with a diachronic self feel they have an identity that persists through time, from the past to the future, while people

with an episodic self, including the likes of Strawson, experience themselves as existing solely in the present [35]. According to Strawson, these episodic selves are not pathological, nor do they lead to a feeling of distress. These "Healthy Episodics" do not have any special concern for their past and the narration of their lives [7]. The existence of this nonclinical population challenges not only the notion of a narrative identity or self, which is essentially diachronic, but also the idea that a lack of narrative is at cause in BPD pathologies.

To account for the instabilities of identity experienced by people with this disorder, Gold and Kyratsous [7] propose another conception of the self as an "*intrapersonal team reasoner*." According to this nonnarrative model, each person is composed of a "team of transient agents," who are necessarily episodic and have their own projects and temporalities. Agents offer identity coherence to the self when they identify with the team through "intrapersonal team reasoning," which consists in answering the question "What do I, as a person (team) over time, want and what actions should the present self take to achieve it?" [7]. Consider the example of a studious agent who wants to pass an academic test the following week and a sporty agent who plans to train daily. These two agents belong to different time frames and share incompatible interests. Nevertheless, they do not jeopardize the temporal coherence of the self; they identify with the team and share a common vision of the future self, at the cost of abandoning goals, such as certain training sessions, or even personality traits. The coherence achieved is thus not a matter of narrative unity between past and future experience, but rather of the ability to "act in pursuit of projects that extend over time" with the other transient agents [7]. According to Gold and Kyratsous [7], individuals with BPD suffer from "lack of identification and lack of a sense of continuity" [7] between transient agents, thus affecting the continuity between their goals, projects, and ambitions over time.

Schmidt and Fuchs [11], in response, offer a nuanced critique of Gold and Kyratsous' [7] proposal by suggesting, synthetically, that there is *no such thing as a nonnarrative identity*. Sympathetic to the idea that the self is composed of different and sometimes conflicting traits and projects, Schmidt and Fuchs [11] acknowledge the conception of the self as a team of transient or episodic agents. However, in their view, this conception is not contradictory to the narrative model of the self, since "the person as an intrapersonal team of transient agents itself relies on narrative understanding in a relevant sense" [11]. Indeed, according to Schmidt and Fuchs

[11], the identification with a team, whose functioning remains enigmatic for the authors and by which the transient agents are unified, coincides with the formation of a so-called narrative identity. In order to recognize themselves as a team and to project themselves in unison into the future, the transient agents must be linked in a meaningful way, in a narrative that allows them, for example, to relate the success of an academic test to the fact that the sporty agent skipped a training session to study. This integrative unity, which ensures the coherence of the self without reducing the difference between episodic selves, is precisely what narrative identity is about. Prior to identification, the deliberation between the different transient agents also involves narratives: anticipating the undesired consequences of the course of action of the sporty agent, including failing an academic test in order to train, the person might feel a sense of guilt, of disappointment, which expresses a variety of proto-narrative: “the person failed her exam *because* she practiced.” This critique is made from a phenomenological conception of narrative identity that unpacks Fuchs’ conception [10] across four levels: (i) proto-narrative structures, (ii) proto-narratives, (iii) narratives, and (iv) narrative identity.

- At the lowest level are the *proto-narrative structures*, which consist in intentional and motivational connections between current and prereflective experiences. Affectivity, bodily feelings, memories, or habits are examples of such structures that give meaning to events lived in the present and therefore constitute the basis for possible narratives. To use Schmidt and Fuchs’ [11] example, the sensation experienced at the door of an ex-partner gives meaning to this event, which calls for a narrative.
- While proto-narrative structures give meaning to a lived event, *proto-narratives* associate several past or imagined events, in a prereflective, nonverbal way. The fact of recalling with pain the humiliating events of the day or anticipating with dread that which tomorrow might bring are examples of such associations, which are made on the basis of feelings, beliefs, desires, or wishes.
- The proto-narrative structures and the proto-narratives, once objects of reflection, become *narratives* about one’s life. Such narratives refer to explicit stories about an event (proto-narrative structure) or a sequence of events (proto-narrations), that are told from the first-person perspective.
- They participate, along with proto-narrative structures and proto-narratives, in the constitution of *nar-*

*rative identity*, which integrates a person’s various episodes and characteristics and provides a sense of identity through time.

According to Schmidt and Fuchs [11], the issue in BPD is not the absence of narrative and diachronic identity, as Gold and Kyratsous [7] had (mis)interpreted, but a disturbance in narrative processes, of which affective and interpersonal instabilities are both cause and consequence. In short, the authors suggest that the “key features of BPD present significant modifications of proto-narrative structures and inhibit the development of a narrative identity, resulting in a disturbed sense of identity” [11].

### The Necessity of a Phenomenological Stratification of the Self

In general, we endorse Schmidt and Fuchs’ [11] response to Gold and Kyratsous’ [7] criticism of the narrative interpretation of BPD. It seems that the self as an intrapersonal team reasoner is constituted on the basis of narrative processes. This hypothesis is already present in Ricoeur [18] who identifies action as an extension of narrativity. According to Ricoeur [18], in order to direct one’s actions toward certain goals (i.e., passing an exam), the person must know themselves and have a form of narrative identity (i.e., passing school is important to me). What’s more: some form of narrative, explicit or implicit, is always involved in the expression of a person’s projects (i.e., I want to pass the exam *because* academic success is important to me).

Moreover, the conception of narrative from which Schmidt and Fuchs [11] develop their critique seems closer to experience. The authors dismiss “a narrow understanding of narrative” [11], according to which narrative identity is an autoconstitution of the self. This latter conception, notably supported by Denett [36], Schechtman [37], and Lamarque [38], suggests that the story of a life exists only when it is put into words by oneself, which would imply that the self is “a product of a narratively structured life, that it is constructed in and through narration” [13]. Going against this understanding of narrative, Schmidt and Fuchs [11] suggest that explicit narratives about the self are always already based on “different aspects of experienced narrativity” ([11], p. 327), as previously described. This nuanced conception of narrative identity is consistent with the idea that identity is a process of self-knowledge rather than a constitution of self, abstracted from any experiential basis. Or, to use Ricoeur’s

words, in relating to ourselves “we attempt to discover and not simply impose from outside the narrative identity which constitutes us” [39].

However, Schmidt and Fuchs’ [11] conception of narration seems to leave one of their principal problems unresolved: identity over time. A question that requires us to determine how episodic selves are reconciled in a form of diachronic identity is particularly undermined in BPD. Schmidt and Fuchs [11] rightly suggest that these selves, associated with proto-narrative structures and proto-narratives, are linked through narratives that make possible the constitution of a diachronic narrative identity (or the identification with the team). But in order for episodic selves and their associated proto-narratives to be unified in the same story (or team), they must belong to the same person. The question then arises as to *why* episodic selves do not remain absolutely unbound, alien to each other; *how* do they recognize themselves as being part of the same self or belonging to the same team?

To account for this paradox, it is necessary to think of a stratum prior to the narrative constitution of episodic selves that renders their integration and distinction possible. To that end, we could hypothesize the existence of a tacit form of narrative that already links together, in a fabric of stories, the proto-narratives about ourselves and the events of our life. Of this tacit narrative is born a tacit identity insofar as the significant cohesion of the events of our life always appears as belonging to us. This narrative and this identity are *tacit* in the sense that they are prereflective and could not be the object of an explicit narration (they are also, in this sense, pre-predicative). The prereflective narratives are not already there, ready, and waiting only to be reflected upon. Rather, they are only given through explicit narratives that take them up and at the same time transform their meaning. These prereflective narratives work in the shadows and provide, on the surface, a minimal cohesion to episodic selves and their associated proto-narratives, such that they integrate an explicit narrative and identity. However, this tacit identity and narrative should not be confused with descriptions told about oneself. They are probably not a draft version of our experience that we try to translate and elaborate verbally. Rather, they would be a form of minimal unity of one’s life and individuality, which make possible in retrospect the life story about oneself and the constitution of our narrative identity. Thus, according to this hypothesis, the constituted self is preceded by something like a self that is not yet constituted, but makes the first possible – we will come back to this thesis.

In addition to offering an answer to the problem of permanence over time, the hypothesis of a tacit identity also clears up the confusion surrounding the Healthy Episodics thesis and offers a new interpretation of TPL. As noted earlier, this thesis, defended by Gold and Kyratsous [7], suggests that episodic selves are not pathological *per se*. However, Schmidt and Fuchs [11] note that Gold and Kyratsous [7] do not explain why episodics, unlike individuals with BPD, do not suffer from the heterogeneity of transient agents. In response to this unresolved question, Schmidt and Fuchs [11] suggest that the narrative processes underpinning the self as an intrapersonal team are disturbed. Similarly, we believe that some people suffer from diffuse identities because their tacit form of identity is weak and vacillating. In contrast, Healthy Episodics are not affected by the lack of diachronic and narrated identity because their episodic selves are already linked prereflectively. In other words, their tacit identity reduces their identity heterogeneity in such a way that they have the luxury of ignoring the question of personal identity or, in Strawson’s words, of maintaining a “limited interest” in their past and future [35]. So how do we account for a form of tacit identity and of what is it really constituted?

This asks for a phenomenology that investigates the *conditions of possibility* of the experience of unifying different episodic selves and chapters of one’s life. This research has been initiated by Schmidt and Fuchs [11] who identify different layers of experience that serve as the foundation of narrative identity as described by Fuchs [10]. Therefore, we propose to follow in the wake of Schmidt and Fuchs [11] while paying particular attention to this tacit form of identity that they did not explicitly thematize. We aim to provide a description of this form of tacit identity by appealing to the *archaeology of the self* as formulated by Tengelyi [12, 40]. This archaeology reveals the layers, from the most originary to the most socially instituted or constituted, forming the self or narrative identity. The main thesis we want to defend is that there is a self that is not (yet) a constituted self (which we have been referring to as tacit identity). This layer of the self makes the “constituted self” (who we are) possible and thus it is the basis of our narrative identity. Briefly put: I am myself even before I can say who I am or tell my stories. In the same way, stories never told make me who I am even before I or anyone else knows what these stories really are. The task of phenomenology is to deal with this tacit layer of self with and through the explicit narratives that the narrator produces by relying on tacit and not well-formed stories. This will involve exposing, retrospectively and through the detour of conscious narra-

**Table 1.** The stratification of the self inspired by Tengelyi's phenomenology

Layers of experience	Life story	Self
↑ Most "instituted"	<b>Sense institution</b> Fixation of the sense formation of our experience by expressing it through language, e.g., <i>narrations</i>	<b>Self-institution</b> Active self-constitution of the self through narratives told about oneself, e.g., <i>narrative identity, episodics self, transient agents, diachronic self</i>
	<b>Sense formation</b> Dispossessed and underground process in which the multiple and fluctuant sense of our experience unfolds and transforms itself, e.g., <i>proto-narrations, proto-narrative structures, tacit narrative</i>	<b>Self-formation</b> Passive and tacit constitution of oneself correlative to the sense formation in experience, e.g., <i>tacit identity</i>
↓ Most "archaic"		<b>Mineness or minimal self</b> Familiarity or intimacy of our own experience, lived in a prereflective and automatic way, e.g., <i>minimal self of D. Zahavi</i>

tives, how these tacit stories produce modes of subjectivity. It is thus a work of a hermeneutic phenomenological archeology, which goes beyond the narrative self and well-crafted stories, and allows us to understand identity instability in the experience of people suffering with BPD in a new light.

### A Phenomenological Archaeology of the Narrative Self

In *The Wild Region of Life History*, Tengelyi [12] proposes a phenomenological interpretation of narrative identity. His interpretation is the fruit of the field opened by a recasting of phenomenology, a field open to all the elusive, inchoative phenomena that constitute the life of the self before its expression by language. This theoretical approach is of particular interest to us because it allows us to think up a form of tacit identity and tacit narrative, in terms of sense, that lie at the foundation of the narratives told about oneself. Since, for Tengelyi, identity is always associated with a form of narrative, we will first unpack his conception of life story – in terms of sense formation and sense institution – followed by his conception of identity as both a self-formation and a self-institution. As we are interested in a form of (almost minimal) identity, we will define Zahavi's [13–15] concept of minimal self and situate it in the framework of Tengelyi's phenomenology, as the most archaic stratum (shown in Table 1).

According to Tengelyi, the life story, around which personal identity is constituted, is twofold: it designates both the immediate experience of life and the story emerging from it. According to its primary meaning, the story of a life refers to what Tengelyi calls *sense formation* (or

sense in the making; *Sinnbildung*), which unfolds below conscious experience in what we could call the a-subjective phenomenological field. For Tengelyi [12], the sense of our lived experience is not always "immediate" and available for expression. Unbeknownst to us, our lives take on new determinations as experiences continue to unfold. This is due to sense formation, which describes a dispossessed and underground process in which a multiple and fluctuant sense unfolds and transforms itself. The sense is "in the making," yet anonymous and unavailable. It presents itself in the form of shreds of sense, of micronarratives of a single life. A microstory emerges when, for example, an event from our past suddenly presents itself under a new angle, acquiring a new sense. These shreds of sense, reaching consciousness, are similar to the proto-narrative structures and proto-narratives of Schmidt and Fuchs [11] that can be reappropriated by the person. As we suggested earlier, it implies that the microstories of our lives could link up without our knowledge and that there is a form of unity of sense that can be inferred retrospectively. Thus, in spite of its multiplicity, the sense in the making has a unity, an ipseity that Tengelyi expresses with the Richirian notion of an "ipseité du sens" [12, 41, 42] and with the concept of "cohesion without concept" [43]. Although the nature of this unity remains mysterious, this unity of sense is what explains that the proto-narratives of a life can be unified in an exhaustive history of our life with which we identify.

The story of a life becomes a story told about itself when the person seizes these proto-narratives and links them into a coherent story. For Tengelyi, this narration consists in a *sense institution* (*Sinnstiftung*), which fixes the sense of our living experience by expressing it through language. When narrating, we deploy our lived experience meaning from an inchoate sense formation, but at

the same time we reduce its multiplicity and its mobility by choosing a way of telling it and soliciting linguistic expressions that are necessarily readymade or sedimented. This induces an excess of the sense over its expression and explains the impression of dissatisfaction attached to the narration about oneself: the impression that one could always have said better or more and the impression that irremediably, something escapes from this narrative that we tell to ourselves or to the others. The story of a life as a sense formation constitutes the basis of the narratives told about oneself and guarantees their primordial unity.

Tengelyi associates two forms of narrative identity with these two aspects of life story. The story told explicitly about oneself is a corollary of an “*fixation of self-identity*” [12]. To describe this process, one can also use the evocative expressions of “self-institution (*Selbststiftung*).” This process refers to narrative identity pertaining to an active self-constitution of the self through narratives told about oneself [31]. The person constitutes her identity from the narratives of her life, which she identifies as her own. If these narratives are partial, tied to one moment of experience or one aspect of her individuality, then she forges what we referred to as an episodic self (including transient agents). With the institution of panoramic narratives, which embrace the triple temporality of life, it is rather a diachronic identity that is constituted. The multiple diachronic and episodic identities described previously should therefore be designated as the product of self-institution, which are the most instituted layers of the self.

At the basis of this self-institution are more informal processes of “*formation of our self-identity*” [12]. Self-formation (*Selbstbildung*), in short, consists in a passive and tacit constitution of oneself correlative to the sense formation in experience [40]. Contrary to the self-institution, the self-formation is not constituted by the subject but rather by the experience and the anonymous evolution of its sense. This form of underground identity is not predetermined but is formed and transformed with the experience: this is why, for Tengelyi, it is a *formation of self-identity*. This process unfolds through time, but not according to the rules of chronological time. The progression of self-formation accelerates or pauses according to events experienced. Despite its temporality, self-formation is not a diachronic identity like the self-institution. In the same way that the sense formation has a certain unity, an ipseity, the whole of the individual determinations bind together in a cohesion in constant transformation, which allows oneself to recognize his or her different episodic selves as himself or herself. In terms of experi-

ence, the self-formation implies that before we describe ourselves, we are already someone, not in the simple formal sense of an “I,” but of a set of individual determinations that are inscribed in the unfolding meaning of our experience. It is this self-formation that also gives us a sense of self (*sentiment de soi*), the impression of having an individuality even before it is described [40].

Let us specify that if we can indeed speak of the inchoative deployment of sense formation in the depths as a self-formation, even before there is an explicit resumption of these arousals of sense in narratives, it is because the sense formation and the formation of the self are “connected” [12]. Without knowing it or wanting it, we adhere to these shreds of sense that determine us in our individuality. This connection or adherence relationship presupposes the mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*) of experience that takes on the meaning of participation: the sense formation of experience is mine insofar as it involves me, it concerns me. I do not have to intentionally identify this sense as mine in a second step: the sense formation always already gives itself as “irreducibly mine by this feeling that nobody can live any other life than his or her own” [12].

This form of mineness, which is situated below the self-formation, points to a very similar direction as the minimal self described by Zahavi [32]. Zahavi distinguishes two forms of the minimal self or for-me-ness: a minimalist one and robust one. The minimalist version of the minimal self refers to the fact that we are always the subject of our own experience, that it is always already lived in the register of the first person (“I”). According to Zahavi, this form of minimal self is not altered in psychopathology. The robust one explains the fact that most often our own experience feels familiar and intimate, in a prereflective and automatic way [14, 15]. This familiarity of experience can be undermined in certain circumstances, such as Heideggerian angst, or psychopathological symptoms or illness, such as dissociative reactions. The mineness revealed by the analyses of Tengelyi, expressing more than the simple fact that the experience is lived in “I,” comes closer to this augmented version of the minimal self. Since the familiarity of our own experience precedes at the archeological level of feeling a determinate individuality and the possibility of describing it, the minimal self is likely one of the most archaic layers of identity, that is, the most primary layer, which makes sense of phenomenal processes at later levels. The minimal self or the mineness of experience is thus, in our view, the basis of self-formation.

## Discussion: Reconfiguration BPD's Experiences of Self

In examining Tengelyi's phenomenological model of narrative identity, we have identified three layers of the self, from the most archaic to the most instituted: the *minimal self*, as understood by Zahavi; the *self-formation*, identified by Tengelyi; and the *self-institution*, corresponding to the conceptions of the self proposed by Fuchs and Schmidt [11] and Gold and Kyratsous [7]. This self stratification can also model certain self-experiences associated with the BPD identity axis. In our view, the identity-level disturbances experienced by individuals with BPD are not primarily related to the self-institution, nor to the minimal self, but to the intermediate stratum of self-formation, the repercussions of which may have an effect on the other layers of the self. Based on the pathological experiences of people with BPD, we propose to highlight the dynamics within the stratification of the self and the repercussions of the weakening of one layer of the self on the others. This repercussions can be both in an upward movement, where disturbances at the level of a deep stratum are transposed to the more superficial layers of self-experiences, and in a downward movement, where disturbances at the instituted level influence the deeper stratum of the self life.

### *Sense of Emptiness*

Perhaps one of the most common experiences reported by people with BPD is a *sense of emptiness*. This emptiness, which has nothing to do with a form of freedom or casualness, is experienced as a weight that pulls the self down [44] and takes on several determinations [45]: the sense of emptiness is lived as a feeling of internal absence [4], an impression of deadness, nothingness, a void feeling swallowed [46], a sense of vagueness [47], an internal hole or vacuum, aloneness [48], an impression of woodenness [49], and numbness and alienation [10]. In the narrative interpretation of TPL, this feeling has been related to the absence of a stable and coherent history of self and thus to a breakdown in what we have termed the self-institution. Although the weakening of the self-institution, which we will discuss shortly, may reinforce this feeling of emptiness in a regressive way, we suggest that it is primarily related to a disturbance in the self-formation. Indeed, what is at stake here is the loss of the feeling of our individuality, linked to the cohesion of the sense of our experience, which accompanies us, inhabits us even when it is not expressed in words. Indeed, in BPD, it is as if, in contact with experience, the self is no longer or hard-

ly ever formed. These fissures in self-formation can be explained by a disassociation between self-formation and sense formation: although, at the deepest level of the self, there is a sense in the making, this sense formation, in itself anonymous, determines less the self in its individuality and its development. Accordingly, Schmidt suggests that people with BPD do not develop themselves as much from their experiences (as drastic as they may be) because they define themselves more by the changing nature of their lives than by the changes these events might introduce into their lives [8].

### *Instability of Identity*

This lack of deep self-formation or transformation is contrasted with the *instability of identity*, also characteristic of people with BPD, which refers to recurrent changes in self-representations, preferences, goals, and values [2]. Most obviously, this instability can be seen in the sequence of their relationships, jobs, and friends [50]. In our opinion, these superficial and disjointed identity changes do not imply a profound transformation in the self-formation, but rather are a response to the feeling of emptiness. In order to fill this emptiness in themselves, these people invest themselves in experiences lived in the present. This is suggested by one of Miller et al. [45] participants, talking about her strategies for coping with emptiness: “[I] just involve myself in everything just to keep my mind distracted”. This investissement in the present as a response to the chronic feeling of emptiness can be explained by other factors, such as impulsiveness [45] or boredom to which their impression of emptiness predisposes them [51]. Their present experiences, which could be short and usually quite intense, are so important that they determine them and introduce a turning point in their lives, reorienting their self-images as well as their goals and projects [8]. As Fuchs [10] suggests, people with BPD “are only what they are experiencing at this moment, in an often intense and yet empty and flat present”. In our vocabulary, various episodic self-institutions succeed one another, which are not always coherent with one another, precisely because they have lost connection with this phenomenological basis of identity institution, namely the self-formation and sense formation. The identity instability that results from this disconnection from the self-formation could be amplified by a vulnerability of the background of safety, that is, a familiar environment constituted through development and providing a stability in the experience [52]. This perpetuated identity instability, and this stability within instability [53] leaves people with BPD struggling with a painful feeling of incoherence.

### *As if Identities*

In our view, for these individuals, each experience is an opportunity to fill the void within them by answering once and for all the question “Who am I?” which promises to organize and stabilize their identity. As Schmidt and Fuchs [11] argue, people with BPD are “oriented toward narrative”. However, each attempt to constitute a diachronic identity is difficult to achieve as the result of Fuchs’ [10] reasons discussed previously, but also frustrating because it leaves them with a false self [54]. Indeed, the constituted identity appears to them as inauthentic, fraudulent [11]. This impression is not only due to the fact that people with BPD construct or invent themselves, rather than discover themselves, but also because they cannot do otherwise. In their reality, the self-institution can take on the meaning of a creation of the self because the self-formation, disrupted and weakened, can no longer serve as a basis and guarantee of authenticity for self-narratives. This false identity is similar to the personality “as if” which does not constitute its identity from the basis of an interior feeling of identity, but by identifying oneself with its immediate environment [55] or constructed social roles. Yet, these identifications are experienced as masks that one puts on without being able to shed the sense of inauthenticity, guilt, and fraud that can accompany them [8]. The “as if” function does not open possibilities to engage with the world and the others, but it functions as a production of fantasies that capture the subject. Following Hanna Sehgal, we could distinguish here an purely autonomous “as if” that creates a false world and sense of reality, and a positive “what if” function where stories and phantasies serve as openings for new possibilities of inhabiting a common world [56]. Thus, it is the weakness of the process of self-formation, among other things, that forces them, in spite of themselves, to borrow the images, goals, and projects of those surrounding them.

### *Dissociation, Depersonalization, and Derealization*

Sometimes, this identification with others metamorphoses into dilution or diffusion of the self. Then the person adopts the form and characteristics of their casual partner and loses themselves in it [44]. These experiences are accentuated during periods of stress in which individuals with BPD can experience dissociative symptoms, such as losing a sense of themselves (depersonalization) or their environment (derealization). Involving the boundary between self and reality (including others), these experiences seem to involve the minimal self, in his more robust version (mineness). Indeed, what is at stake in these reactions is the feeling of familiarity generally associated

with the experience of one’s own body and the world. Suggesting that the minimal self would be achieved in BPD raises the question of the distinction between BPD and schizophrenia spectrum disorders (SSDs), which has been described as a disorder of the minimal self [57–62]. Although there is a clinical distinction between those with BPD and those with SSDs [63, 64], the phenomenological distinction is debated to the extent that the minimal self appears to be affected in both disorders [64]. Nevertheless, it appears that the phenomenological features of minimal self disorders in SSDs, such as diminished self-affection, hyperreflexivity, and disturbances of the subject’s “grip” or “hold” on the experiential or perceptual field [61], are absent in BPD. This calls for future research to differentiate the level of alteration of self-experience in BPD and SDS, from the perspectives of other transcendental phenomenological structures such as embodiment, affectivity, imagination, and phantasy. For the moment, we could hypothesize that unlike SSD, the identity disturbance in BPD does not result primarily from the minimal self-weakening but from the self-formation fragilization that can have an effect on the minimal stratum of the self.

### **Conclusion**

BPD is a complex pathological condition whose manifestations at the identity level have often been interpreted, notably by Fuchs [10], as a fragmentation of narrative identity. This interpretation has been challenged by Gold and Kyratsous [7] and then reaffirmed by Schmidt and Fuchs [11] who proposed a more complex conception of the narrative self. The issue in this discussion is to determine the most appropriate conception of self or identity over time, significantly weakened in TPL. However, the authors of the debate do not explain how the different self-descriptions are bound into a unified narrative identity of self. We have proposed in this article to contribute to the debate by implementing the phenomenological method of Tengelyi [12] to unpack the layers of the self, from the most instituted to the most archaic stratum: the *self-institution*, the *self-formation*, and the *minimal self*. Based on these layers, we hypothesized that the identity disturbances experienced by individuals with BPD are first and foremost a matter of self-formation, that is, the passive and tacit constitution of the self that already unifies the different self-institutions as oneself, which disturbances may affect other layers of the self.

This phenomenological reconfiguration of symptoms associated with BPD identity disorders might have impli-

cations for therapies. Psychotherapeutic approaches affecting the self-formation should be favored. Fuchs suggests “a therapy that could be put under the heading of ‘sustainability’” [10] by promoting long-term commitments and relationships to oneself and to others. Although Fuchs [10] locates identity fragmentation primarily at the level of the self-institution, this therapeutic approach might have effects at the level of self-formation by developing a coherent temporal self. Complementary to this approach, placing emphasis on long-term agentivity, collective psychotherapy that integrates people into already formed networks and community of sense could be beneficial. This network of sense in which the person is part of can contribute to weaving together his or her proto-narratives at the level of self-formation and then of self-institution. These types of therapeutic communities and treatment can be found, for example, in Institutional Psychotherapy [65] or Soteria experience [66]. It could also be interesting to explore the embodied therapies, such as Dance and Movement Therapy, that take place on a nonverbal sense-making level. These therapies, which have been shown to be effective with people with schizophrenia [67] and autism spectrum disorder [68], may also help people with BPD by encouraging self-giveness and thus a sense of self, which is a fundamental basis for personal identity and link to the minimal self and the self-formation. They could also have a beneficial effect on the other axes of BPD, that is, the affective axis and the inter-

subjective axis, insofar as emotion or affect is intrinsically linked to body movement as well as to the bodily resonance of others [69]. Future research should thus study qualitatively or quantitatively the effects of these approaches on people with BPD.

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Cassandre Bois and Tudi Gozé wrote the article. István Fazakas, from his experience in phenomenology, has reviewed and improved the philosophical sections of the article. Juliette Salles, from her clinical expertise with people with BPD, reviewed and validated the clinical elements of the article.

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