

"Ms. A," a 23-year-old single female with borderline personality disorder, came to her therapist's office and reported an embarrassing episode in which she had shouted at a clerk in a retail store because he would not accept her credit card as payment for the merchandise she wished to buy. She noted that everyone was staring at her when she shouted, and she felt that she had made a spectacle of herself. She said she would not have shouted except that the clerk was rude and curt with her.

Her psychotherapist asked for clarification: "Was it a policy of the store not to accept credit cards, or was it a matter that he would not accept your credit card?"

The patient felt that the therapist was suggesting she had overreacted and became furious at him: "What difference does it make? Even if it was the policy of the store and not directed at me, he still should have been courteous!"

The patient's irritation then escalated to an explosion of rage in which she screamed at him, "You're not interested in empathizing with my feeling of being humiliated - only in figuring out how I caused the whole incident! It's clear that you don't care about me, and you're only interested in getting all the money you can from my trust fund! Sometimes I think you try to make me worse by irritating me just so you can keep me in treatment longer!"

The therapist attempted to explain that he was not insinuating that she was to blame for anything, but only asking for information about the details of the situation.

The therapist paused for a minute and said, "It seems to me that the same thing that happened in the store is happening here with me. You're attributing to me some malevolent intent that isn't at all where I'm coming from. You make yourself miserable by reading things into interactions that aren't really there."

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