

## PERSONALITY PROFILES OF SELF-IMMOLATORS

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### ABSTRACT

*Thirty one self-immolators were compared with thirty one suicide attempters by consuming organophosphorus compounds in spheres like their personality, nature of life events and presence of depression. The personality of self-immolators was unique in the sense that they lack ego strength and superego strength and they were impulsive, aggressive and sensitive. They were not depressed. Life events score was more among the self-immolators.*

*Key Words: self-immolation, personality, life events*

When we look into the statistical figures of suicides in India, it is evident that Indian women are over represented in the population of self-immolators. For instance, in a study of one hundred female burn cases at Madurai, 70% were suicidal in nature (Venkoba Rao, 1989). In 1984 of all suicides, 9.4% were by way of fire in our country (Bureau of Police Research & Development, Government of India). In Kilpauk Medical College Hospital, Madras, out of 1368 burn cases admitted in one year 800 died and 20% were suicidal in nature (Annual statistics, KMCH, Madras, 1993). On the contrary, suicide by self-inflicted burns is uncommon in western countries especially in U.K. and U.S.A. and accounts for less than 1% of suicide (Weissman, 1974). Self-immolation deaths by fire represented about 1% suicides at Victoria Hospital, London (Shkrum & Johnston, 1992). In England and Wales, hanging and poisoning are the most commonly used methods of suicide among men and women and burning is uncommon (McClure, 1987).

Indians were over-represented in a study of self burning among immigrants in England (Sony Raleigh & Balarajan, 1992).

Thus, burn is a common method of suicide preferred by Indians and it has got a high degree of success. ICMR has made an observation that burn, a major public health problem has not been researched from psychological and psychiatric points of view (ICMR, 1987).

The objective of the study was to assess the

personality profile of self-immolators and to find out the presence and nature of life events prior to their suicidal attempts. So the self-immolators were compared with suicide attempters who consumed organophosphorus compounds.

The hypotheses tested are

1. The pre-morbid personality of self-immolators is not different from that of suicide attempters by organophosphorus compounds.
2. The score on life events scale by the self-immolators may not be high when compared to suicide attempters by organophosphorus compounds.

### MATERIAL AND METHOD

All self-immolators admitted to Burn Intensive Care Unit of Kilpauk Medical College Hospital, Madras, during the period of 1st December, 1993 to 31st March, 1994 were selected for the study.

Inclusion Criteria were

1. Must have attempted suicide by burn
2. Must be in the age of 15-40 years and
3. Must have fully recovered from the physical effects of burns

Exclusion criteria were

1. Accidental and homicidal burns.
2. Electrical and chemical burns.
3. Those critically ill, and
4. Those with life threatening physical illness.

Those who satisfied the selection criteria were selected for the study. Control group comprised of age and sex matched patients who were admitted during the same period in the medical wards of the same hospital for the treatment of suicidal attempts by consuming any organophosphorus compounds.

On both the groups following tests were administered :

1. Semi-structured proforma to collect socio-demographic details.
2. Sixteen Personality Factor test (form E) (Cattle, 1957) to assess the personality.
3. Hospital Anxiety Depression Scale to assess the presence of depression or anxiety.
4. Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Indian modified version of Holmes & Rahe Scale) to find out the presence of life events before the suicidal attempts.

The mean scores in different scales by the study and control group were compared using the student's 't' test.

## RESULTS

Total number of self-immolators included in the study were 31, the mean age being 28 years (Male=16, Female=15; Married=24, Unmarried=7).

Total number of subjects included in the control group were 31.

The scores on 16 personality factors of 16 PF test by the burn and control groups are given in table I. The scores by burn group in factor C indicate that the self-immolators lack ego strength. They are emotionally less stable, immature, lacking in frustration tolerance, neurotically fatigued and easily annoyed by things and feelings. Scores on factor E indicate that they are more aggressive and stubborn. Scores on factor F indicate that they are enthusiastic and impulsively lively. Scores on factor G show that they have a lower super-ego strength and they are unsteady, demanding, impatient and lacking in internal standards. Scores on factor I show that they are sensitive and tender minded. Scores on factor Q3 indicate that they have a low integration and they are indisciplined, self-conflictual, careless of pro-

**TABLE I**  
**MEAN AND SD OF THE SCORES ON 16 FACTORS OF 16 PF TEST BY BURN AND CONTROL GROUP**

FACTORS	BURN	GROUP	CONTROL	GROUP	t	p
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD		
A. Reserved versus Outgoing	6.23	1.87	5.39	1.81	1.767	>0.05
B. Dull versus Bright	4.23	1.78	4.01	1.87	0.475	>0.05
C. Emotional versus Mature (ego strength)	4.26	1.67	5.64	1.68	3.218	<0.01
E. Submissive versus Dominance	8.26	1.98	6.37	1.86	3.87	0.001
F. Sober versus Impulsively lively	6.68	2.23	5.29	1.73	3.29	<0.005
G. Casual versus Conscientious	3.94	1.55	5.29	1.74	3.21	<0.005
H. Timid versus Adventurous	6.45	2.25	5.39	1.81	2.024	<0.025
I. Tough versus Sensitive	7.86	1.68	6.27	1.57	9.2	<0.001
L. Trustful versus Suspecting	6.18	1.53	6.07	1.48	0.28	>0.1
M. Conventional versus Eccentric	4.08	1.38	4.27	1.43	0.534	>0.1
N. Simple versus Sophisticated	3.82	1.72	4.07	1.67	0.583	>0.1
O. Confident versus Insecure	6.56	1.73	6.39	1.67	0.395	>0.1
Q1. Conservative versus Experimenting	7.06	1.38	6.87	1.43	0.323	>0.1
Q2. Dependant versus Self-sufficient	8.07	1.73	8.26	1.79	0.425	>0.1
Q3. Lack of stability versus Controlled	3.77	1.65	5.68	1.68	4.454	<0.05
Q4. Relaxed versus Tense frustrated	7.13	1.68	6.61	1.83	1.38	>0.05

## PERSONALITY PROFILES OF SELF-IMMOLATORS

to act and follow their own urges.

In all these factors the control group scored in normal range and there were significant differences between the scores, thus invalidating the first hypothesis. In all other factors there were no significant differences.

**TABLE 2**  
**SCORES ON HOSPITAL ANXIETY**  
**DEPRESSION SCALE**

	BURN GROUP		CONTROL GROUP		t	p
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD		
DEPRESSION	8.38	3.13	6.58	2.6	2.40	<0.01
ANXIETY	5.64	1.58	5.80	1.49	0.04	>0.1

None of the groups scored above the cut-off point for depression or anxiety indicating that neither depression nor anxiety was responsible for their suicidal attempts. However there were 6 depressives in the Burn group and 3 depressives in the Control group. But the mean score was below the cut-off point of 11. (Table 2)

**TABLE 3**  
**SCORES ON SOCIAL RE-ADJUSTMENT**  
**RATING SCALE**

	MEAN	SD	t	p
BURN GROUP	30.06	22.81	2.215	<0.025
CONTROL GROUP	15.48	27.91		

The score of life change units in the burn group is significantly higher than the control group. Thus the second hypothesis is rejected.

Most commonly reported life events among burn group were major change in arguments with spouse (14 out of 31) and separation from the spouse due to marital problems (3 out of 31). Alcoholism of the person or spouse was another factor contributing to these problems (Table 3).

### DISCUSSION

The self-immolators are shown to lack ego strength meaning lesser integration of ego functions, lack of superego strength and are aggressive and sensitive. Thus they are emotionally less stable and lack frustration tolerance and are easily annoyed by acts/

situations and feelings. They are sensitive and follow their own urges.

Patterson et al. (1993) have reviewed the studies on the pre-morbid psychopathology of adult burn patients. Kolman (1983) concluded that the incidence of mental illness and personality disorders was higher in burn patients than in normal population. In a study of burn patients, 33% had character disorder (Rockwell et al., 1988). Antisocial personality disorders were over-represented in many studies of burn victims (Noyes et al., 1979 and Ward et al., 1987).

In one Indian study it was observed that suddenness and impulsive nature were characteristic of burn cases and the impulsiveness was attributed to the personality disorder (Venkoba Rao., 1989).

They were not necessarily depressed. Probably depressives have time to plan and choose an easier way out. Marital problems were common among self-immolators. In a study of fatal burn cases in Kanpur, family quarrels, marital disharmony and dowry related problems were frequently reported as motives (Gupta & Srivastava, 1988). In a study of female burn cases, marital problems were to the fore in more than half of the cohort (Venkoba Rao, 1989). The most frequent precipitating event for self burning was marital disharmony (31.6%) in a study of suicide by burning in Korea (Suk et al., 1991).

As described above, the personality of self-immolators was distinct and they were not depressed. Suicide attempts in depressives are under the influence of punitive superego (Stillion et al., 1989). They are premeditated, well organised and more coherent. On the other hand suicidal burns appear to be less influenced by superego. They are less pre-meditated, more spontaneous and impulsive, occurring in the wake of stressful life events. Self-immolators have a sensitive, unstable and aggressive personality with lack of frustration tolerance and internal standards. With a weak ego and superego they tend to follow their own urges when faced with a life stress. The moment the idea of suicide flashes in their mind, the readily available choice is to burn themselves.

The choice of the method of suicide may be due to easy availability. This is especially important since most of the cases are highly impulsive. Some of them, immediately following a quarrel, rushed into

a room, bolted from inside and burnt themselves.

## CONCLUSION

What is inferred from the study is that on the one hand we have depressives whose suicide attempts can be prevented by early diagnosis. And on the other hand we have people crying for help, whose attempts are not very serious. In between we have a group who are highly impulsive and choose a potentially lethal way of committing suicide. Our job is to identify this group and strengthen their coping mechanisms.

The utility of 16 Personality Factor test for identifying this group as a screening tool is also suggested. A shortfall in the present study is that the severely burnt suicide completers are not included in the study. This can be partially explained by the fact that the chance of recovery was not in their hands once they set fire to themselves. Further studies are suggested to assess the biological parameters of aggressive self-immolators.

"what are called statistics of the motives of suicide are actually statistics of the opinion, concerning such motives, of the officials in charge or the information services". -Emil Durkheim

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