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## **Personality Correlates Associated with Choice of Method of Committing Suicide**

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*Males who completed suicide using active methods were compared to those who completed suicide using passive methods for their scores on the MMPI. No differences were found. Similarly, no differences were found in scores on the MMPI between those shooting themselves and those hanging themselves. Those who shot themselves were significantly younger than those who hung themselves.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most important aspects of an attempt at suicide is the method chosen by the individual to kill himself. It might be expected that the method chosen would be associated with various characteristics of the individual. Lester (1970) noted that older people use more active methods of killing themselves (such as shooting, hanging, jumping, and cutting), whereas younger people use more passive methods (such as poison, drugs, gas, and drowning). Psychotics tend to use more active methods than do nonpsychotics.

There has been virtually no research into personality correlates of the choice of method for suicide. Lester (1970) studied a sample of individuals who had made highly lethal and mild attempts at suicide and found no significant associations in either group between choice of an active or passive method and fantasy aggression as measured by the TAT (Murray, 1943).

The present study was designed to explore further the possibility of finding personality correlates of choice of method for suicide by studying the scores on the MMPI (Hathaway and McKinley, 1945) of a sample of completed suicides.

## METHOD

A sample of 52 patients in psychiatric hospitals in the United States who had completed suicide and for whom an MMPI protocol was available was used. All the subjects were white males.

The definition of "active" versus "passive" was taken from the work of Darbonne (1967), who got judges to rate 18 methods of suicide for the degree of activity manifested in each. Those methods whose score was 9 or less are called here "passive" methods (use of drugs, gas, poison, and drowning) and those methods whose score was greater than 9 are called here "active" methods (use of gun, hanging, jumping, and cutting).

The method of suicide could not be determined for four of the subjects and so the sample was reduced to 48.

## RESULTS

The 13 subjects who used passive methods were compared with the 35 subjects who used active methods on each scale of the MMPI by means of *t*-tests. They did not differ in their scores on any of the scales looked at (L, F, K, Hs, D, Hy, Pd, Mf, Pa, Pt, Sc, or Ma). The largest *t*-value was for the Sc scale ( $t = 1.42$ ,  $df = 46$ , two-tailed  $p < 0.20$ ). The subjects using active methods for suicide obtained higher scores than those using passive methods on seven of the nine scales measuring the degree of psychopathology (binomial  $p = 0.09$ ).

The two groups did not differ in age and, in fact, were closely matched for their mean age ( $t = 0.076$ ,  $df = 46$ ). The mean age of those using passive methods was 35.4 years and of those using active methods 35.2 years.

In order to further explore differences in correlates of choice of method for suicide, the 15 subjects who hung themselves were compared to the 14 who shot themselves. Those shooting themselves were significantly younger than those hanging themselves ( $t = 2.64$ ,  $df = 27$ , two-tailed  $p < 0.02$ ). The mean ages were 30.0 years for those shooting themselves and 42.9 years for those hanging themselves. The two groups differed significantly only on one scale. Those shooting themselves had significantly lower scores on the L scale than those hanging themselves ( $t = 2.20$ ,  $df = 27$ , two-tailed  $p < 0.05$ ). The subjects who hung themselves obtained higher scores than those shooting themselves on seven of the nine scales measuring the degree of psychopathology (binomial  $p = 0.09$ ).

In order to test further whether differences existed in the responses of the subjects on the MMPI, a profile analysis was carried out using the technique of a generalized analysis of variance (Cooley and Lohnes, 1962). The subjects were compared on the 12 scales of the MMPI used above.

Those subjects who killed themselves using active methods did not differ in the profile analysis from those who killed themselves using passive methods ( $F = 1.29$ ,  $df = 12/35$ ).<sup>1</sup> Those subjects who killed themselves by hanging did not differ from those who killed themselves by shooting ( $F = 1.07$ ,  $df = 12/16$ ).<sup>1</sup>

### DISCUSSION

This study found no evidence for differences in personality for those using active methods of suicide and those using passive methods. In addition, no differences were found between those shooting themselves and those hanging themselves.

Two studies have now found no differences in personality traits between those using different methods for suicide. Both studies were exploratory and did not attempt to test specific hypotheses. Hypotheses could, however, be derived. For example, females are found to use passive methods of suicide more than males. Thus, it could be predicted that males who use passive methods will obtain lower scores on the Mf scale of the MMPI than males who use active methods. The data of the present study do not support such a hypothesis.

In spite of these negative results, it seems highly probable that differences exist between those using different methods for suicide. However, it is not possible at the present time to suggest where these differences might lie.

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<sup>1</sup> The dispersions of the mean vectors were homogeneous. For the comparison of those using active methods with those using passive methods  $F = 1.10$ ,  $df = 78/1728$ , and for the comparison of those hanging themselves with those shooting themselves  $F = 1.11$ ,  $df = 78/2277$ .

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