A STUDY ON THE PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF WIVES OF ALCOHOLICS

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SUMMARY

A study was conducted for assessment of personality characteristic using EPI & 16 PF on wives of 30 primary alcoholics who satisfied Feighner's Criteria and were compared with the wives of 30 normal controls matched on marital and socio-demographic variables. There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups on EPI and scores were within normal limits. Both the groups had a similar profile scores on 16 PF being submissive, timid, trustful, conventional, conservative, dependent and poised. These findings were not in favour of the concept of "Pathological wives" causing alcoholism in their husbands as advocated by some western studies. Personality characteristics of our sample in general were significantly different from normative data for western women, where the latter were more dominant, adventurous and selfsufficient. Implications of these findings are discussed in the light of our socio-cultural context.

Alcoholism is one of the major medical and public health problem all over the world. Regarding its etiology various biological and psychosocial theories have been propounded. However, till to date the precise cause of alcoholism remain far from established. In recent years the theoretical and practical approach has been directed towards the family of the alcoholic, marking the beginning of the new era in the understanding of alcoholism.

The impact of alcoholism on marital-family functioning and the influence of marital-family relationships on the development and maintenance of alcoholism are challenging problems. There are three major areas where research has been carried out: firstly, the study of alcoholics' spouses emphasizing personality traits; secondly, the study of alcoholics' children and thirdly, on alcoholic family interactions, emphasizing current ongoing pattern of interchange like marriage roles (Orford et al., 1976; Natera et al., 1988; Asher & Brissett, 1988) marital satisfaction (Bullock and Mudli, 1959; Gerald, 1971; Rychtarik et al., 1989), interperson perception (Drewery and Ray, 1969; Maisto et al., 1988; McKay et al., 1989) and marriage cohesiveness (Orford et al., 1976; Perodeau and Koln, 1989).

Though one of the major issues involved in alcohol dependence is its effect on marital situation surprisingly considerably less attention has been focused on the spouse of the alcoholic. Systematic studies in this area started only after 1950's. The central theme of the "Disturbed personality model" is that alcoholism in the husband is caused by the psychopathology of the non-alcoholic spouse (Puterman, 1953 Quoted by Orford et al., 1976; Asher & Brissett, 1988). It is held that a women who is in some way psychologically maladjusted-dependent, hostile, domineering, masochistic, sadistic marries the vulnerable person to fulfill her own neurotic needs. Being psychologically disturbed herself, she often contributes to the alcoholism of her hus-
band and needs therapeutic help as much as her chronically dependent spouse.

Whalen (1953) was one of the strongest proponents of this hypothesis and described four types of women based on cases seen in a family service agency. They are: Suffering Susan, Controlling Catherine, Wavering Winfred and Punitive Polly. However, relatively few studies have attempted to back up the 'Wife as Villain' model which speaks of the psychopathology of the non-alcoholic spouse married to an alcoholic and of her own tendency to breakdown or 'decompensate' if his deviance diminishes (McDonald, 1956; Kogan et al., 1963; Bailey et al., 1962; 1967; Haberman, 1964; Harrell, 1986; Asher & Brissett, 1988).

Many of the issues arising out of the above concept are reviewed by Orford et al. (1976). Majority of the evidence cited in support of the 'disturbed personality model' is uncontrolled, unsystematic and subject selection non-random and potentially biased. In addition, measurement was crude and in most cases conclusions were based solely on clinical impressions. More refined studies by Tarter (1976), Paolino Jr. et al. (1976), Rae & Forbes (1966), Farid et al. (1986) have proved the contrary. Edwards et al. (1973) in their comprehensive review concluded "they are women who have essentially normal personalities of different types, rather than any one particular type".

There are studies and observations about characteristics and status of women in India in general (Kapadia, 1986; Sharma, 1989). Though alcoholism is a major problem in India (Mohan et al., 1985) there are no Indian studies to establish relationship between alcoholism and wives personality. We wanted to study whether the observations on western wives on their spouses' alcoholism are valid in our cultural context. Hence the present study was undertaken to assess the personality of the wives of alcoholics and the extent to which they differ from the wives of normal controls.

Material and methods:

Sample: Consisted of 2 groups

I. Experimental group:

Consisted of 30 wives of alcoholics who attended the department of psychiatry, Christian Medical College, Vellore, for the treatment of their husbands. They were consecutive cases who consented for the study and whose husbands had met Feighner's Criteria for definite diagnosis of alcoholism. Cases were excluded if patient had any severe physical disabilities other drug addictions, Schizophrenia, Manic-Depressive Psychosis or Seizure disorder.

II. Control group:

Included couples who were normal clinically, free from any physical or psychiatric illnesses. Sample included 30 wives. They were relatives (parents, siblings and distant relatives) accompanying neurotic patients to the department.

The mean age of the subjects were 37.3 years (S. D. = 5.3 years) and 34.8 years (S. D. = 5.9 years) for experimental and control group respectively. Correspondingly 30% and 20% had no schooling. 17% had studied upto middle school and 53% & 43% higher secondary to college level education. Only 4 subjects in each group were employed, remaining being house wives. Only 10% in each group belonged to class I on socio-economic scale (Kuppuswamy, 1962) while others were almost equally distributed in 3 other classes in
both the groups. 23 persons in each group were Hindus, 5 Christians and 2 Muslims. 90% of the subjects were from Tamilnadu. The mean duration of the marriage was 14.1 years (S. D. = 5.54) and 13.7 years (S. D. = 6.95) for experimental and control group. The only parameter which showed statistically significant difference was in relation to number of children. The experimental group had on average 3.8 (S. D. = 1.28) children while control group had on average 3.1 (S. D. = 1.35) (p<0.05).

Instruments:

1. Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI)

Developed by Eysenck & Eysenck (1964) has been translated and standardized for Indian (Tamil) population (Abraham et al., 1977).

2. Cattell’s 16 PF Questionnaire, Form E.

Test provides a personality profile rating each subject on a 10 point scale for 16 bipolar factors. Form E is a special purpose instrument designed for the use in persons of limited educational and cultural background and the standardized Tamil version of the questionnaire is available (Bhashyam, 1978; Devar, 1979). The personality factors measured are same as those included in forms A, B, C & D. Form ‘E’ utilises a two alternative, forced choice answer format which minimizes confusion in the person of limited socio-cultural and educational background and it adopts readily to oral presentation (Devar, 1979).

Procedure:

After filling up the detail proforma, Tamil or English version of the personality questionnaires were administered depending on the educational levels to both experimental and control groups.

Results:

On EPI the groups were compared on their scores on extraversion and neuroticism scales. There were no statistically significant differences. Also the scores were within the normal limits.

Table I—EPI scores.

|                      | Experimental group | Control group |
|----------------------|--------------------|---------------|
|                      | (N=30)             | (N=30)        |
| Extraversion         | Mean 10.4          | Mean 10.0     |
|                      | S. D. 3.0          | S. D. 3.2     |
| Neuroticism          | Mean 10.4          | Mean 11.9     |
|                      | S. D. 4.5          | S. D. 5.9     |

r Test: Not significant

On 16 P. F. (Table II) it is clear that the two groups score almost equal on all the profile scores except on Factor Q. 1. Though all the scores fall within the normative range, compared to the standard mean score for female general population there was a significant tendency toward low-score discription. Both the groups were found to be submissive, timid, trustful, conventional, conservative, dependent and poised. There is a marked shift away from scores related to dominance and aggressiveness, adventurism, suspiciousness, eccentricism, being critical and experimenting, self-sufficiency and tenseness.

Discussion:

Alcoholism and its relation to marital-family functioning has attracted attention of researchers and clinicians but the conflicting reports has generated a challenging problem. As earlier studies were anecdotal and unsystematic an
### Table II—16 PF: Distribution of mean scores.

| Factors | Standard mean | Experimental group (N=30) | Control group |
|---------|---------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| A       | 5.8 (1.6)     | 5.1 (0.89)               | 5.5 (1.0)     |
| B       | 4.6 (1.7)     | 5.36 (1.15)              | 5.2 (1.52)    |
| C       | 3.3 (1.9)     | 3.73 (1.46)              | 3.7 (1.37)    |
| D       | 2.6 (2.0)     | 0.43 (0.65)              | 0.63 (0.74)   |
| E       | 4.2 (2.4)     | 2.21 (1.79)              | 2.11 (1.71)   |
| F       | 5.1 (1.7)     | 4.56 (1.23)              | 4.35 (1.09)   |
| G       | 3.2 (2.1)     | 2.04 (1.59)              | 2.56 (1.63)   |
| H       | 5.7 (1.7)     | 4.68 (1.41)              | 5.23 (1.07)   |
| I       | 3.4 (2.0)     | 1.27 (1.37)              | 2.9 (1.50)    |
| J       | 3.3 (1.3)     | 2.29 (1.23)              | 2.69 (1.49)   |
| K       | 4.1 (1.3)     | 2.66 (1.21)              | 3.11 (0.68)   |
| L       | 5.1 (1.8)     | 3.13 (1.43)              | 2.81 (2.08)   |
| M       | 2.9 (1.6)     | 1.90 (0.91)              | 2.24 (1.55)   |
| Q1      | 3.7 (2.1)     | 2.70 (1.66)              | 2.00 (1.49)   |
| Q2      | 4.6 (1.6)     | 5.0 (1.47)               | 4.8 (1.08)    |
| Q3      | 5.0 (2.1)     | 2.43 (1.86)              | 2.69 (2.15)   |

Figures in parentheses indicate standard deviation.

### Figures
- \( t = 2.69, \) d.f. = 50, \( p < 0.05 \)
- Comparison of sample means of all other factors statistically not significant.

Improvement in this direction is the utilization of standardized questionnaires which has provided objectivity to certain extent. Retrospective computerized bibliography (Centre of Alcohol studies, Rutgers university, N.J.) on spouses of alcoholics could extract hardly 10 studies, using MMPI on spouses of alcoholics. Although 16 P. F. has been used on alcoholics, no study was reported on spouses. Though many western studies deal with spouses in general (Paoline Jr. et al., 1976; Steinglass, 1981) this study concentrated only on wives because female alcoholism, at least those who seek psychiatric help, is still very rare in our country. Socio demographic factors show the importance of the cultural influence, which places premium on the feminine attributes like submissiveness and dependency. For example, except for 2 cases in the control group, all the marriages were 'arranged' according to tradition; only 3 marriages in each group were college educated and 4 women in each group were pursuing a career. All women were married only once.

On EPI, comparison of the two groups did not reveal any statistically significant difference on neuroticism or extraversion. There is only one other study available which utilized EPI (Oxford, 1976). The study carried out on 100 wives of alcoholics, found raised neuroticism scores. Though this was not as highly raised as their alcoholic husbands, it was significantly raised in comparison with the general population sample.

There are no comparable studies using 16 PF. The 16 PF profile data show striking similarities between the two groups. Mean of both the groups fall within the normative data. Majority have low score description, important being more mild and submissive, silent, timid, trustful and adaptable, conventional, simple, conservative and poised. It is interesting to note the way these scores fit the traditional Indian feminine stereotype, submissive and dependent (Kapadia, 1986; Sharma, 1989). All the factors appear to be culturally reinforced. Neither group scored towards the high scores on any factor. There is a marked shift away from scores related to dominance and aggressiveness, adventurism, eccentricity, being critical and experimenting, self-sufficiency and tenseness.

In our sample 33.3 percent of the husbands had started taking alcohol before marriage, a fact which goes against the wives' distributed personality model. Argument that alcoholics admission to hospital was a major relief and testing done on admission reflects reduced stress and reduced psychopathology seems to
have no basis because admission to psychiatric hospital may by itself increase the stress. Also 16 PF is believed to measure stable personality traits and not the state dependent variables.

Thus, the present study does not justify the assumption that wives of alcoholics have personality traits which precipitate or perpetuate their husbands' alcoholism. In addition, basic to the concept of wife's psychopathology is the complementary male choice. As majority of the marriage are arranged by traditional methods this cannot be the case in our culture (Kapadia, 1980; Sharma, 1989) and is not severe in the sample studied.

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