



## Is perceived burdensomeness present in the lives of famous suicides? A lack of support for the interpersonal theory of suicide

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### ABSTRACT

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (IPTS) proposes that suicide is the result of three constructs: perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belonging, and the acquired capability for suicide. To explore the presence of these constructs in suicides, two raters read 72 summaries of biographies of famous suicide for the extent to which each construct was present. Only 11 of the 72 (15.3%) suicides were judged to have perceived burdensomeness compared to 65 (90.3%) and 48 (66.7%) for thwarted belonging and the acquired capability, respectively, indicating that a sense of burdensomeness is not commonly found in suicides.

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (IPTS) proposed by Joiner (2005) and refined by Van Orden et al. (2010), has become one of the most cited theories of suicide. Since its emergence, the IPTS has spawned a plethora of research (Chu et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2016). The IPTS proposes that three variables are central to all suicides (a claim made in Joiner in 2005). Thwarted belonging refers to perceptions of weakened interpersonal relationships and is comprised of a general sense of disconnection from others (i.e., loneliness) and having no one to turn to or support (i.e., reciprocal care; Van Orden et al., 2010). Perceived burdensomeness is a general belief that one is a burden and is characterized by a sense that others would be better off without them (i.e., liability) and that they lack value (i.e., self-hate). The IPTS postulates that these two constructs (thwarted belonging and perceived burdensomeness) are what result in suicidal desire. However, to transition to suicidal behavior, one must also have an acquired capability for suicide. The acquired capability is comprised of a lowered fear of death and an elevated tolerance for pain. The theory has stimulated a great deal of research which, on the whole, has supported the theory (Chu et al., 2017). It has been noted, however, that much of the research on the IPTS is from correlational studies by proponents themselves of the theory. Effect sizes for these relationships have been weak-to-moderate, suggesting potentially modest clinical significance (Chu et al., 2017).

Despite this, the theory has received a great deal of criticism. Hjelmeland and Knizek (2020) presented the most coherent critique of the theory, arguing that the popularity of the theory does not match with the strength of the evidence supporting it. An additional critique raised by Hjelmeland and Knizek is that the IPTS provides simple solutions to understanding a complex problem (i.e., suicide) and that this simplicity may be part of the appeal. One major problem with the research that tests the theory is that almost all of the research uses samples of living people using a self-report survey constructed by Joiner and colleagues (Brown et al., 2017; Van Orden et al., 2012). The theory, therefore, has rarely been tested using those who have died by suicide.

A second major problem with the research testing the theory is that there has rarely been a test of whether the experiential variable (perceived burdensomeness) is merely one aspect of a general pattern of suicidal cognitions (alongside hopelessness and all-or-nothing thinking). In fact, Lester (2013), in a sample of university undergraduates, found that scores on Joiner's measure of perceived burdensomeness were strongly correlated with scores on measures relevant to the defeat-entrapment theory of depression and suicide (Gilbert & Allan, 1998), rumination, helplessness, and hopelessness, thereby suggesting that several cognitions may be common among those experiencing suicidal thoughts. Related to the variable of perceived burdensomeness, the IPTS does not address what

causes individuals to develop this thought (see Zhang, 2016).

In one of the rare studies on those who have died by suicide, Gunn et al. (2012) examined 261 suicides from Australia and found that 10.3% contained evidence of perceived burdensomeness, 30.7% evidence of thwarted belonging, and 4.2% contained both themes. One obvious objection to this as a test of the IPTS is that not all suicides leave suicide notes (only roughly 25% in most studies), and so a sample of suicides who leave suicide notes may not be representative of all suicides, although it should be noted that findings generally support many similarities between those who leave a note and those who do not (Stack & Rockett, 2018). A second objection is that perhaps the variables were present in the lives of the suicide decedents, but that they did not choose to write about that aspect of their lives in the suicide note.

The present study seeks to explore the prevalence of perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and the acquired capability for suicide in a sample of 72 biographies of famous suicides previously used to test a strain theory of suicide (Zhang et al., 2013). The present study builds upon the research of Gunn et al. (2012) on suicide notes but avoids the two objections previously noted (the limited information in suicide notes and the fact that only a minority of suicides leave suicide notes). We focus on summaries of the lives of famous suicide decedents which have a greater likelihood of picking up perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belonging, and the acquired capability for suicide than would suicide notes.

## Method

### Biographical sample

In the period 1990–2004, Lester read over 100 biographies of famous (or somewhat famous) suicides and wrote essays on each of them.<sup>1</sup> These essays are now available at [www.drdauidlester.net](http://www.drdauidlester.net). This was in the period *prior* to the appearance of the IPTS, and so the essays were not biased by the theory. Zhang, et al. (2013) chose 72 of the suicides to test Zhang's strain theory of suicide which proposes that those who die by suicide experience two or more conflicting stressors. Since Zhang's theory uses different variables than the IPTS, the present study used the same sample of 72 suicides to avoid the authors choosing suicides that supported or did not support the IPTS. The suicides in the sample are listed in Table 1.

One limitation is that there is the possibility, of course, that the biographies were biased in some way

other than by being for or against the IPTS. The reader of the biographies has written a textbook on theories of personality (Lester, 1995b) and so is fully acquainted with all of the major theories and covers them in his course on theories of personality. The major influences in his own subself theory of personality (Lester, 2010) are Andras Angyal (1965), George Kelly (1955), and a modern rational version of Freudian theory (Toman, 1960). In writing the essays on the suicides, he focused primarily on the facts and rarely applied any particular theory of personality.

A study of suicide notes is extremely limited in the information about the suicide contained therein. So far, too few diaries of suicides have been collected (no more than seven or eight) and, again, the information about the suicides' lives contained in these diaries is limited and varies from suicide to suicide (Lester, 2014).

A test of the IPTS could be based on a psychological autopsy study of a sample suicides but, of course, such a study could also be biased by the preferred theory of suicide held by the principal investigators who would, therefore, have to persuade readers of their lack of bias for or against the IPTS, especially since they would be fully aware of the IPTS, in contrast to the biographical essays used in the present study which were written prior to the appearance of the IPTS.

Furthermore, there is no way a reader can verify the ratings made by the researchers conducting the psychological autopsy study. In the present case, readers can check the biographical essays at [www.drdauidlester.net](http://www.drdauidlester.net) and also obtain a published biography of the suicide and read about the suicide decedent's life in great detail. For example, a reader who has some knowledge of Alan Turing's life may agree that Alan Turing had thwarted belonging but query whether he might also have had perceived burdensomeness. There is an essay on Alan Turing available, a biography, and also now a film to form your own opinion.

### Procedure

Two judges were used for the ratings (who had previously rated the suicide notes used by Gunn et al., 2012) so that inter-rater reliability could be assessed. The two judges read each essay and independently scored the case for the presence of each of the three variables in the IPTS: perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belonging, and acquired capability. In order to maximize the possibility of obtaining support for the IPTS, for each of the IPTS variables, judges rated

**Table 1.** The 72 famous suicides included in sample and rating results.

	Occupation	DOB-DOD	Birthplace	Ratings		
				PB	TB	AC
1. Diane Arbus	Photographer	1923–1971	USA	2	2	
2. Reinaldo Arenas	Writer	1943–1990	Cuba			4
3. Edwin Armstrong	Scientist	1890–1954	USA	–	3	2
4. Walter Benjamin	Writer	1892–1940	Germany	–	4	2
5. John Berryman	Poet	1914–1972	USA	2	4	–
6. Bruno Bettelheim	Psychologist	1903–1990	Austria	–	4	4
7. Charles Boyer	Actor	1899–1965	France	–	4	–
8. Henry Broughton	English Nobility	1883–1965	UK	–	4	1
9. Dora Carrington	Painter	1893–1932	UK	–	4	2
10. Viscount Castlereagh	Politician	1769–1822	UK	–	2	1
11. Paul Celan	Poet	1920–1970	Romania	–	4	4
12. Thomas Catterton	Poet	1752–1770	UK	–	–	–
13. Robert Clive	Soldier	1725–1774	UK	–	–	4
14. Kurt Cobain	Musician	1967–1994	USA	–	2	3
15. Hart Crane	Poet	1899–1932	USA	–	3	4
16. Sergei Esenin	Poet	1895–1925	Russia	–	3	1
17. James Forrestal	Politician	1892–1949	USA	1	3	2
18. Sigmund Freud	Psychoanalyst	1856–1939	Moravia	–	2	2
19. Konoe Fumimaro	Politician	1891–1945	Japan	–	2	–
20. Judy Garland	Actress	1922–1969	USA	–	3	4
21. Mark Gertler	Painter	1891–1939	UK	1	4	4
22. Charlotte Perkins Gilman	Feminist/Novelist	1860–1935	USA	1	1	
23. Joseph Goebbels	Politician (Nazi)	1897–1945	Germany	–	–	–
24. Arshile Gorky	Painter	1904–1948	Turkey	–	4	3
25. Kenneth Halliwell	Writer	1936–1967	UK	–	4	4
26. Tom Heggen	Writer	1919–1949	USA	–	4	–
27. Ernest Hemingway	Writer	1899–1961	USA	–	4	2
28. Ludvik Hoch	Businessman	1923–1991	Czechoslovakia	–	1	–
29. Abbie Hoffman	Yippie/Writer	1936–1989	USA	–	1	4
30. Robin Hyde	Poet	1905–1939	New Zealand	–	4	4
31. Paul Kammerer	Scientist	1880–1926	Austria	–	4	3
32. Weldon Kees	Poet	1914–1955	USA	–	2	–
33. Jerzy Kosinsky	Writer	1933–1991	Poland	4	4	1
34. Vladimir Kovalovskii	Scientist	1842–1883	Russia	2	4	
35. Alan Ladd	Actor	1913–1964	USA	–	1	4
36. Robert La Follette	Politician	1895–1953	USA	–	1	2
37. Primo Levi	Writer	1919–1987	Italy	–	1	4
38. Vachel Lindsay	Poet	1879–1931	USA	–	2	–
39. Georg List	Economist	1789–1846	Germany	–	–	1
40. Ross Lockridge	Writer	1914–1948	USA	–	1	1
41. Jack London	Writer	1876–1916	USA	–	–	4
42. Eleanor Marx	Socialist Activist	1855–1898	UK	–	2	
43. Vladimir Mayakovsky	Poet	1893–1930	Russia	–	4	2
44. Aimee McPherson	Preacher	1890–1944	Canada	–	4	4
45. Hugh Miller	Scientist	1802–1856	UK	–	1	–
46. Yukio Mishima	Writer	1925–1970	Japan	–	1	2
47. Marilyn Monroe	Actress	1926–1962	USA	–	4	4
48. Gerard de Nerval	Writer	1808–1855	France	–	4	2
49. Phil Ochs	Folk Singer	1940–1976	USA	–	3	3
50. Cesare Pavese	Writer	1908–1950	Italy	1	4	–
51. Sylvia Plath	Poet	1932–1963	USA	–	4	4
52. Freddie Prinze	Comedian	1954–1977	USA	–	4	–
53. Lewis Puller	Soldier	1945–1994	USA	1	4	4
54. Mark Rothko	Painter	1903–1970	Latvia	–	4	1
55. Crown Prince Rudolph	Royalty	1858–1889	Austria	–	4	2
56. Anne Sexton	Poet	1928–1974	USA	–	4	4
57. Elizabeth Cody Stanton	Feminist/Writer	1815–1902	USA	1		–
58. Victor Tausk	Psychoanalyst	1870–1919	Hungary	2	4	–
59. Sara Teasdale	Poet	1884–1933	USA	–	4	–
60. Ernst Toller	Activist/Writer	1893–1939	Germany	–	1	2
61. Marina Tsvetaeva	Writer	1892–1941	Russia	–	4	2
62. Kurt Tucholsky	Writer	1890–1935	Germany	–	4	2
63. Alan Turing	Mathematician	1912–1954	UK	–	4	–
64. Randy Turpin	Boxer	1928–1966	UK	–	1	4
65. Vincent van Gogh	Painter	1853–1890	Netherlands	–	3	2
66. Stephen Ward	Osteopath/Artist	1912–1963	UK	–	4	–
67. Simone Weil	Philosopher/Writer	1905–1943	France	–	2	2
68. Otto Weininger	Psychologist	1880–1903	Austria	–	2	–
69. Dolly Wilde	Socialite	1895–1941	UK	–	3	4
70. Virginia Woolf	Writer	1882–1941	UK	–	3	4

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	Occupation	DOB-DOD	Birthplace	Ratings		
				PB	TB	AC
71. Gig Young	Actor	1913–1978	USA	–	4	1
72. Stephen Zweig	Writer	1881–1942	Austria	–	2	–
<b>Presence in Biographies:</b>						
Perceived Burdensomeness		11 of 72	15.3%			
Thwarted Belonging		65 of 72	90.3%			
Perceived Burdensomeness & Thwarted Belonging		10 of 72	13.9%			
Acquired Capability (AC)		48 of 72	66.7%			
Perceived Burden, Thwarted Belonging, & AC		4 of 72	5.6%			

Notes: 1, 2, 3, 4 indicate the presence of the construct in the biography with varying degrees of agreement between the two judges – see Procedure above.

whether the construct was not present (0), maybe present (1), or definitely present (2). With two judges, the scores for each variable can range from 0 to 4. Thus, even if only one judge thought that the variable was possibly present in the life of the suicide decedent, that person would get a score of 1 and the variable was counted as present, providing as liberal an interpretation of the presence of the IPTS variables as possible. In Table 1, the zeros are omitted for ease of reading the table.

The inter-judge agreements for the possible/definite presence versus absence of the variables were thwarted belonging (72.2%), perceived burdensomeness (87.5%) and acquired capability (73.6%). Additionally, Cohen's Kappa was calculated on the presence of the IPTS variables for both judges. Cohen's Kappa for thwarted belongingness was 0.243, for perceived burdensomeness was 0.243, and for the acquired capability was 0.482. These values can be interpreted as fair for thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness and moderate for the acquired ability (Altman, 1999; Landis & Koch, 1977).

## Results

Using the weakest criteria, that is at least one judge rated the variable as maybe or definitely present, perceived burdensomeness was rated as present in 11 of the 72 suicides (15.3%), thwarted belonging as present in 65 of the 72 suicides (90.3%), both of these variables present in 10 of the 72 suicides (13.9%), and the acquired capability for suicide in 48 of the 72 suicides (66.7%). The ratings for the 72 suicides are presented in Table 1.

## Discussion

The present research expands upon Gunn et al. (2012) by exploring the presence of thwarted belonging, perceived burdensomeness, and the acquired capability for suicide in the biographies of 72 famous suicides.

The results were generally in line with the results from the study of suicide notes by Gunn et al. (2012). Perceived burdensomeness was not common in the biographies of these suicide decedents, although the presence of perceived burdensomeness was greater in the 72 biographies than in the sample of 261 suicide notes (15.3% vs 10.3%, respectively). Far more common was a sense of thwarted belongingness (90.3%) and an acquired capability for suicide (66.7%). The acquired capability for suicide was not explored in suicide notes by Gunn et al. (2012), but thwarted belonging was more common in the 72 biographies than in the 261 suicide notes (88.9% versus 30.7%).

It is important to note that there are some suicides in the sample that supported the IPTS. An example of a suicide death with both thwarted belonging and perceived burdensomeness present is Jerzy Kosinsky.

His new lover, (Ula), was threatening his marriage, and he and Kiki (his wife) began to discuss divorce.

In Switzerland in 1990, Jerzy had a number of physical ailments: cardiac arrhythmia, loss of sensation in his fingertips and perhaps panic attacks. The new love triangle had its frustrations, and a feeling of ennui and fatigue seemed to engulf Jerzy. His heart medication made him groggy, and he began to fear developing Alzheimer's disease. By April, 1991, friends were concerned about his physical health and his apparent depression.

Jerzy spent the evening of May 2 with Ula and went home to Kiki who was already asleep. He wrote a suicide note, in which he talked of becoming a burden because of his decrepitude, took some sleeping pills, got into the bathtub and put a plastic shopping bag over his head as recommended by the Hemlock Society. Kiki found him the next morning. (from [www.drdavidlester.net](http://www.drdavidlester.net))

There were many examples of suicides who had experienced traumatic and painful experiences that may have resulted in their acquired capability for self-harm, for example, Primo Levi who survived the Auschwitz concentration camp in World War II and Sylvia Plath who had previous attempted suicide and

had experienced electro-convulsive shock treatment (most likely without sedation) and the trauma of psychiatric hospitalization.

As noted by many commentators, the variable of thwarted belongingness has been proposed in many forms by previous theorists, including Durkheim's (1897) proposal of social integration and Naroll's constructs of thwarting disorientation and protest suicide (Lester, 1995a; Naroll, 1963). The critical variable in the IPTS is the focus on perceived burdensomeness, although this too was previously touched upon by De Catanzaro (1980). One or both judges saw perceived burdensomeness possibly or definitely in only 11 of the 72 suicides: Diana Arbus, John Berryman, James Forrestal, Mark Gertler, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jerzy Kosinsky, Vladimir Kovalovskii, Cesare Pavese, Lewis Puller, Elizabeth Cody Stanton, and Victor Tausk. Only one suicide (Jerzy Kosinsky) was rated by both judges with perceived burdensomeness as definitely present. Thus, perceived burdensomeness is not commonly found in suicides. The IPTS argues that the presence of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and the acquired capability combined lead to the greatest likelihood of death by suicide (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010). Suicidal thoughts, especially passive forms, might stem from the presence of either thwarted belonging or perceived burdensomeness alone, but only when combined does suicide risk become more heightened and, when combined with the acquired capability, deadly (Van Orden et al. 2010). However, the combined presence of thwarted belonging and perceived burdensomeness was rare (13.9%) and even rarer was the presence of all three variables (5.6%).

A number of limitations must be considered when examining the present results. One immediate objection to the present study is our focus on famous suicides, or rather suicides famous enough that someone wrote a biography of them. The lives of these individuals may not be typical of those who die by suicide. Future work utilizing well-designed psychological autopsy studies of a sample of suicides in general may better illuminate the presence of these constructs in the lives of typical suicide decedents, although it is important to note that psychological autopsy research is not without its biases (Hjelmeland et al., 2012). However, there is no reason to suspect that famous suicides would be more or less likely to support the IPTS. Another limitation that must be considered is the nature of the data. Both the biographies themselves, and the subsequent summaries by Lester, are potentially influenced by the theoretical perspectives

and opinions of the people creating them. The biographers who wrote these works were aware of the suicide deaths of those they were writing about and may have emphasized factors they felt contributed to the suicide. Likewise, the summaries of these biographies may be influenced by the theoretical orientation of the individual summarizing them. For example, some of the summaries by Lester contain psychoanalytic perspectives on the suicides. Similarly, the ratings themselves may reflect the theoretical perspectives of those doing the ratings. Finally, even if biographies are used for the research, ideally both judges should read all 70 biographies in full rather than the summary essays. All of these limitations must be kept in mind while evaluating the results.

In conclusion, despite support among previous research on samples of living individuals who reported suicidal thoughts and attempts (Chu et al., 2017), the present study found that, among these individuals who died by suicide, support for the IPTS was much more mixed. There was broad support for the presence of thwarted belonging, but little support for the role of perceived burdensomeness. This is in line with previous work by Gunn et al. (2012) who found that perceived burdensomeness was rare in suicide notes. The present work calls into question the role of perceived burdensomeness among suicides and the ability of the IPTS to speak to all suicides.

## Note

1. The essays were originally written by Lester prior to 2004 and placed in an unpublished journal (*Proceedings of the Pavese Society*) which was sent to 25 colleagues in the field of suicidology. Later, the essays were re-typed and uploaded to [www.dravidlester.net](http://www.dravidlester.net) with different dates. For example, the essay on Sylvia Plath was written in 1992 and published in 1993 in *Proceedings of the Pavese Society* but uploaded to the website in 2011.

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