

REVIEW ARTICLE

Psychological Autopsy: Reconstructing the Mystery of Suicide

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ABSTRACT

The psychological autopsy is a procedure that involves the reconstruction of the motives and existential crisis of the deceased with a particular focus on suicide risk factor. In this procedure, the events and circumstances leading to death are reconstructed, and suicidal intent, risk factors, and other factors are explored thoroughly. The psychological autopsy helps in giving a lesser clouded vision of the victim profile and at times even facilitates in specifically defining the cause of death. It is at present the most direct method available for studying the relationship between particular risk factors and completed suicide. Psychological autopsy has proved to be beneficial for the masses with its systematic method to understand the psychological and contextual circumstances preceding suicide. High prevalence of mental disorders in people who have committed suicide has been found in psychological autopsy studies.

Keywords: Interviewing, Psychiatric implication, Psychological autopsy, Suicide.

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INTRODUCTION

The psychological autopsy is a procedure that involves the reconstruction of the motives and existential crisis of the deceased with a particular focus on suicide risk factor.¹ The psychological autopsy is a well-tested method of investigating complete suicides and this term was coined by Shneidman.² It is a form of forensic retrospective assessment of mental state at the time of a criminal offence in which a thorough retrospective analysis of the decedent's state of mind and intention at the time of death is done. In psychological autopsy, the events and circumstances leading to death are reconstructed, and suicidal intent, risk factors, and other factors are explored

thoroughly.³ Profile of the deceased is recreated by taking into account the information from interviewing the relatives and reassessing the forensic record of the deceased.

METHODOLOGY/PROTOCOL TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW IN PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

- The most important part of the interview is that the ethical considerations and the integrity of the deceased must be respected.^{4,5}
- Interview of survivors which may include family members, friends, coworkers.
- Ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and confidence with the informant: obtaining an informed consent before the investigation is of prior importance.⁶
- Systematic investigation of psychological, psychiatric, medical, and social data.
- Relevant information should be obtained from police investigation: suicide note(s); postmortem report; psychiatric, medical, pharmacy, criminal, employment, financial, military, and school records; personal journals; wills, etc.
- The aspects like site of death, recent symptoms/behaviors, precipitants to death, psychiatric history, medical illness history, family history, attachments/social supports, emotional reactivity, lifestyle, and character are investigated.
- In cases of suspected alcohol- or drug-related deaths, it is useful for the forensic psychiatrist to have some working knowledge of toxicological concepts and methods.

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The interviews used are structured in a manner to combine open-ended questions with standardized instruments. While open-ended questions are suitable to collect information about the trajectory of life events, childhood development, and parent-child relationships, the standardized instruments can gather information about psychiatric disorders, impulsiveness, aggression, childhood abuse, and personality traits. The medical examiner not only determines the cause of death but also

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the manner of death, which can be natural, accidental, suicidal, homicidal, or not determined.

BENEFITS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

- Psychological autopsy has proved to be beneficial for the masses with its systematic method to understand the psychological and contextual circumstances preceding suicide.
- It has been beneficial in governmental inquiries into major public suicides and in legal contexts.
- It plays an important role in suicide prevention, crisis intervention, suicide research, and helps in the prevention of such untoward incidents and prove to be informative for medical examiners and to the judiciary as well.

PSYCHIATRIC IMPLICATIONS

High prevalence of mental disorders in people who have committed suicide has been found in psychological autopsy studies. Studies have revealed that about 90% of those who commit suicide suffer from one or more mental disorders, depression being found in the majority of cases and hence this outcome has proved to be beneficial in identification and treatment of such cases at earliest so as to prevent suicide.⁷⁻⁹

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