

Original Article

Importance of Psychological Autopsy in Forensic Science

Pallavi Mohanty¹, Mahipal Singh Sankhla^{2*} and Rajeev Kumar³

¹Student of M.Sc. Forensic Science, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Forensic Science, Vivekananda Global University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

³Associate Professor, Department of Forensic Science, School of Basic and Applied Sciences, Galgotias University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

*Corresponding author email id: mahipal4n6@gmail.com

Received: 20-12-2020; Accepted: 23-03-2021

ABSTRACT

Psychological Autopsy (PA) is a retrospective analysis in the case of equivocal death. Equivocal death is defined as a death that is unknown, undetermined, ambiguous. Specifically considering the case of suicide, many times the exact manner of death is undetermined (i.e. factor which instigated the person to commit suicide). Psychological Autopsy is an approach to scrutinize the risk factor and the psychological state of an individual prior to death. This whole process is carried on by collecting all relevant documents (medical reports, coroner report, details of death, personal documents) of the deceased and extensive interview of family members, friends, next of kin, all people related to the case is interrogated. Finally, after psychoanalysis of the deceased, the manner of death is concluded by synthesizing all collected data. To determine whether it is a case of suicide, abetment to suicide, or accident. This paper reviews the aspect of Psychological Analysis (PA) needed in every suicide case along with the post-mortem examination to determine the root cause of committing suicide.

Keywords: Suicide, Psychological autopsy, Risk factor, Equivocal death, Retrospective

INTRODUCTION

Psychological Autopsy (PA) is an investigating technique used to determine equivocal deaths (specially in the case of Suicide). Equivocal death are the deaths in which the manner of death is undetermined, unknown, ambiguous in nature. Psychological Autopsy (PA) can be of two types: (i) Suicide Psychology Autopsy (SPA) is the process of determining the psychology of the victim prior to the death in case of suicide and (ii) Equivocal Death Psychology Autopsy (EDPA) is a process of determining the actual cause or manner of death^[1]. In this paper, the Suicide Psychology Autopsy is concerned and all its aspects is being discussed. According to World Health

Organization (WHO), 8lakh people die due to suicide every year which is equivalent to 1 person die in every 40 sec and suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among the youngsters^[2]. So, its high time to review the cases of suicide to know the risk factors, actual manner of death, instigating factors, root cause and to prevent the youth from committing suicide further. As far as forensic field is concerned, after death case the victim's body is sent for physical autopsy (in case of suspicious death) which is conducted by the Forensic Pathologist. In the autopsy report, the findings in the victim's body, cause, manner, mode of death are described. But in certain suicide cases, the actual manner of death is unknown. In this cases, Forensic Psychologist assist Medical examiner

to determine the actual manner of death by retrospective analysis of the victim's psychology prior to death.

HISTORY

In the year 1958, an organization was found named as "Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center" by Edwin Shneidman, Norman Farberow, Robert Litman. Around same year, Los Angeles County chief medical examiner Dr. Theodore Curphey, came across many equivocal death cases due to drug overdose. So, Dr. Curphey collaborated with LA suicide prevention center to solve the cases. Edwin Shneidman coined the word "Psychological Autopsy" and also framed certain guidelines to the procedure [3]. Hence, the development of the Psychological Autopsy started from USA.

IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

In many suicide cases, victim's family may challenge or contested case may arise. In these situation, Psychological Autopsy is useful to clarify whether the suicide is intentional, accidental or homicidal. Certain areas which can be known by the retrospective analysis of the victim are:

1. **Cause:** It determines whether the person dies from suicide, vehicular accident, hemorrhage in the brain etc. The actual reason which caused the person to die.
2. **Mode:** It determines whether the person died due to accident, natural, suicidal or homicidal.
3. **Motive:** The reason or the intention behind the persons death. This may include;
Why the person committed suicide but not any other mode? What makes the person to commit the act?
Why the person choose the same day as on someone's birthday, anniversary date etc?
4. **Lethality:** It determines the rate of risk factor associated with the case. It is categorized as high, medium, low, self-inflicting.

5. **Sane vs insane:** In the cases of insurance related, if the person committed suicide then the claim is null and void. If the person dies due to some accident then the insurance can be claimed [4].

INVESTIGATION PROCEDURE

Psychological Autopsy (PA) is generally investigated by 2 ways: (i) Extensive Interview and (ii) Relevant document collection [5]:

Face to Face Interview- This type of interview is done right in front without any interface and with proper consent. Family members, friends, relative, next of kin are interviewed very extensively to know the victim properly.

Health Personnel Interview- The medical examiner, psychologist if the victim has any history of mental illness, all the personnel who were associated with the victim's health are interviewed. The interviewee should be given the prior notice and the consent should be taken.

The Last Contact Personnel- the person who was last in contact with the victim prior to his/her death. Even the forensic personnel are interviewed.

Additional Information- if any personnel provides certain important information related to the victim's death is interviewed and also the information is cross verified to ensure its authenticity.

Relevant Document Collection- Medical certificate, post-mortem reports, evidence lists, crime scene investigation reports, victim's health related report in his prior life to death, personal documents, personal diaries are collected.

AREAS TO BE INVESTIGATED

According to Shenidman, there are 14 areas to be investigated [6]:

Biodata of An Individual- All the information of the victim is collected (name,age, sex, date of birth etc)

Documents Related to Death- Medical certificate, death certificate, history of illness, details of death, forensic reports are collected.

Suicidity Attempt History- If the victim had ever attempted to commit suicide prior to his death or ever talked about it to anybody is reported.

Personality and Lifestyle- The actual lifestyle the victim used to lead and the lifestyle the victim led prior to death is compared. The personality of the person can also be known by interviewing his friends and family members.

Pattern of Reaction to Stress- How the victim used to react when he/she underwent any stress, emotional upsets.

Social Stressors- Certain stresses that are received from surrounding people specifically socially. In today's generation a lot of social pressure are expected from job sectors, peers, relationships etc.

Consumption of Alcohol or Drug Abuse- It is very necessary to determine if the victim consumed any alcohol or drugs. It may be the case of intoxication that led to commit suicide. Many times family members are also not aware about the consumption of drugs by their child. So this information needs to be clarified from the close friend.

Victim's Interpersonal Relationship- Victim's relation with every individual is verified. If any changes in the behaviour prior to death with any individual is to be noted. The person he/she used to earlier and the person victim was in the near time to death.

Victim's Habit Before Death- Every individual follows a certain routine in their daily lifestyle. If something unusual was seen during the days before the death of the victim is to be noted.

Plannings of Future Perspective by Victim- Every individual have some plannings to do in the tenure of

their life. So same in the case of victim it may be the cause that some of those plannings might have failed which led the person to commit suicide.

Intension of Commission- It is necessary to determine the motive or intention behind the commission of crime to determine whether it is a case of suicide, homicide or accidental.

Rating of Lethality- It is ensuring that the manner in which the person committed suicide how far the person can cause harm himself/ herself. It can be self-inflicting, high, medium or low.

Reaction of Informants to the Victims Death- This process of investigation is done by the professional psychologist and they are very much aware about the body language. So, it is mandatory to observe and note how every individual reacted to the death of the victim.

Special Features of The Case- There may be certain information which may be gathered from other people is also to be noted.

FORENSIC APPLICATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

Understanding the Equivocal Deaths and Suicides: In a case of suicide, it is necessary to determine the manner of death by NASH (Natural, Accidental, Suicidal, Homicidal) based on the facts that are collected by the process of interview and from the documents of the victim. There may be the cause of suicide (victim tries to self-inflict) on the other hand it might be the case of sub-intentional (victim doesn't want to commit suicide but there exist certain instigating factor which led the victim to commit such act). The question lies gap between the probability of committing suicide and sub-intentional death^[7].

Understanding the Risk Factors: Considering age as a risk factor, it is stated that children are considered to commit suicide because they don't have the knowledge about the lethality^[8]. Considering sex as a risk factor,

death by suicide among males are 3 times more than females. Certain factors that instigate the victim are unemployment, relationship, substance abuse, painful emotions, socio-economic status, neuroticism (poor level of emotional regulation) ^[9]. These fields to be well scrutinized by a Forensic Psychologist. Profession of an individual is also considered as a risk factor, as the workload and downfall in his/her professional career also force a person to either consume drugs/ alcohol which may trigger to commit Suicide.

Social Media Psychological Autopsy: It is a retrospective investigation on victim's life and the reason that led to suicide. New aspects of Psychological Autopsy collaborated with the social mobile and media. This a sub discipline of Psychological Autopsy (PA). In this modern era of social media, every individual have an account in every platform (Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram etc). Some people are so much into social media that they share almost all their emotions in the social media platform. So, it is also a good tool for investigating to know the psychology of the deceased person. There may be also case of 'cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking' etc which may be the cause of the victim to commit suicide. In these cases a victim may become distress, emotional suffer, psychological problematic which may be considered as an instigating factor. A Case Study which proves how social media PA is going to help:

A South Italian girl was found hanging from the railing of balcony. Using bed-sheet she committed suicide by hanging. Psychology Autopsy was extended with social media autopsy. As a result, many sentimental post was found from Facebook and around 100 messages were exchanged with his boyfriend. Both were in a relationship which was hidden from the girl's parents. For this reason the boy ended or broke up with her. The last text in her phone was;

BOY- "We Couldn't Meet Again"

GIRL- "I Cannot Live Without You" ^[10].

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

In the case of Psychological Autopsy, ethical consideration is the most vital part. Without the consent of the family members, the procedure for autopsy is not proceeded. After the demise of the victim, family, friends and relatives are generally found in distress. So, this method of investigation is generally done between 6-12months after death. With prior information of the process, consent of the individual, community and government procedure continues ^[11]. Before interviewing it is highly recommended that the physical and mental state of the interviewee should be taken into consideration. If they want to quit in the middle of an interview they can. All the proceedings should be done by a professional psychologist.

ADMISSIBILITY

In the Current scenario, there are way more difficulties for the admissibility of psychological autopsy report. There is a more chance of admissibility of "hard science" and medicines as evidence rather than "soft science" and social science due to reliability issue ^[12]. Beyond the research and development required, psychological autopsy should meet the legal standards and criteria for admissibility ^[13]. In Indian context, all the evidence are admissible under section 45 of Indian Evidence Act and Section 45-51 deals with the testimony of the expert in the court ^[14].

LIMITATIONS

Firstly, there is no specific universal defined definition for PA which makes very difficult to accept the report as evidence. After the demise of the victim the interviewee may provide an emotion related response, which may alter the statement given ^[15,16]. There may be the chance of giving false statements against the deceased due to their interpersonal conflicts. Some may provide here and say statements which have no validity in the court of law. There is no specific procedure to conduct the investigation. It may be the case that the

interviewee is not comfortable to give response to the interviewer. Lastly, there is no specific section mentioned in the Indian law for the administration of PA report.

DISCUSSION

Psychological Autopsy (PA) technique has various advantages and disadvantages. Advantages are it can be used to determine the psychology of an individual prior to death by collecting all information relevant to the case. Disadvantage is there is no proper error rate in this technique so it is generally not accepted in the court. Various research are yet to be done in this field and can be used as an investigating technique. It is not limited to suicide cases but can be used in all cases to determine the actual manner of death i.e. Natural, Accidental or Homicidal. In Indian scenario, it should be properly defined in our legal system and should be accepted as evidence.

CONCLUSION

In Forensics, there are various techniques that are used to solve crime but in certain challenged cases there is a need to know the base cause of the death. In case of suicide, it is very necessary to know the factor which instigate the person to commit such act. It is always not the case of suicide as it seems, there may be various factors that influenced the person to commit suicide. Therefore, each suicide case should be investigated along with the psychological aspects also. There is no specific protocol to conduct this technique so it is mandated that a professional psychologist should conduct the investigation. Though this technique has certain loopholes, so at least it can be used as corroborative evidence in the court of law.

REFERENCES

- [1] Puranik D, Paul P, Krishnamurthy R. Application of equivocal death psychological autopsy for investigation: A case study. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*. 2015;2(2):31-36.
- [2] World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/suicide> .
- [3] Weinberger LE, Botello TE, Gross BH. Psychological autopsy: consultative tool for suicide determination. In *Multidisciplinary Medico-Legal Death Investigation 2018 Jan 1* (pp. 119-137). Academic Press.
- [4] Scott CL, Swartz E, Warburton K. The psychological autopsy: solving the mysteries of death. *Psychiatric Clinics*. 2006 Sep 1;29(3):805-22. doi: 10.1016/j.psc.2006.04.003.
- [5] Isometsä ET. Psychological autopsy studies—a review. *European psychiatry*. 2001 Nov;16(7):379-85. doi: 10.1016/s0924-9338(01)00594-6.
- [6] Siddamsetty AK, Aggarwal NK, Bhatia MS. Concept of psychological autopsy <http://medind.nic.in/daa/t14/i2/daat14i2p458.pdf>.
- [7] Pompili M, Mancinelli I, Girardi P, Tatarelli R. Department of Psychiatry, Saint Andrea Hospital University of Rome “La Sapienza” Toward Better Understanding of Equivocal Deaths and Suicides. <http://neuron.mefst.hr/docs/CMJ/issues/2004/45/1/15132162.pdf>
- [8] Soole R, Kölves K, De Leo D. Suicide in children: a systematic review. *Archives of Suicide Research*. 2015 ;19(3):285-304., doi: 10.1080/13811118.2014.996694
- [9] Ross V, Kölves K, De Leo D. Beyond psychopathology: A case–control psychological autopsy study of young adult males. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*. 2017;63(2):151-60. doi:10.1177/0020764016688041
- [10] Aquila I, Sacco MA, Gratteri S, Sirianni M, De Fazio P, Ricci P. The “Social-mobile autopsy”: The evolution of psychological autopsy with new technologies in forensic investigations on suicide. *Legal Medicine*. 2018;32:79-82. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.legalmed.2017.12.008>
- [11] Chachamovich E, Haggarty J, Cargo M, Hicks J, Kirmayer LJ, Turecki G. A psychological autopsy study of suicide among Inuit in Nunavut: methodological and ethical considerations, feasibility and acceptability. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*. 2013;72(1):20078.
- [12] Ormerod D. Psychological autopsies: Legal applications and admissibility. *The International Journal of Evidence & Proof*. 2001;5(1):1-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136571270100500101>
- [13] Bullis RK. Psychological Autopsies. *Encyclopedia of Forensic Sciences*, 2013;3(2):12-25 <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-382165-2.00031-3>

- [14] Saxena G, Saini V. Psychological autopsy–A way to revealing the enigma of equivocal death. *international Journal of Forensic Sciences (IJFSC)*. 2017 Aug 28. <https://medwinpublishers.com/IJFSC/IJFSC16000123....pdf>
- [15] Hjelmeland H, Dieserud G, Dyregrov K, Knizek BL, Leenaars AA. Psychological autopsy studies as diagnostic tools: are they methodologically flawed? *Death Studies*. 2012;36(7):605-26. doi:10.1080/07481187.2011.584015
- [16] Sankhla MS, Parihar K, Daksh J, Kumar R, Agrawal P, Vaishnav L. Indian Juvenile Depression and Future

Criminal Behavioral Forensic Analysis of Udaipur District Population. <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mahipal-Singh-Sankhla/publication/2/Indian-Juvenile-Depression-And-Future-Criminal-Behavioral-Forensic-Analysis-of-Udaipur-District-Population.pdf>

How to cite this article: Mohanty P, Sankhla MS and Kumar R. Importance of Psychological Autopsy in Forensic Science. *Indian Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology* 2021; 19(1): 1-6.