

Psychological Autopsy - The When and Why

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She has more than 9 years of experience in the field of Forensic Psychology, i.e. in conduction Polygraph Examination, Layered Voice Analysis and recently in Brain Fingerprinting as well as Narco – Analysis Examination of suspects in all types of criminal cases (murder, theft, robbery, rape, etc).

ABSTRACT

Psychological Autopsy is one of the most recent tools that has been added to the reports of the psychological techniques available in the repartee of the field of Forensic Psychology.

Psychological autopsy tries to determine the psychological aspects of details by suicide as well as in cases where death all of ambiguous in nature, i.e. there is uncertainty in the nature of death and help is needed to find a copy to conclude the reasons and the cause of death.

In the current article, the author tries to examine to the areas where and how psychological autopsy can be helpful to the experts in understanding the risk factors involved in ambiguous deaths.

Keyword: Psychological Autopsy, Ambiguous Deaths, Suicides, Forensic Psychology, Psychological Tools, Forensic Psychological Tools

INTRODUCTION

Psychological Autopsy, as a term, is defined/refers to the procedure to clarify an ambiguous death so as to arrive at the “correct” as rather an accurate reason for an equivocal death. These deaths are unusually called equivocal because the ambiguity is usually between the modes of death either suicide, accidental, although this ambiguity may exist amongst other modes of death as well (Schneidman, 1981)

Essentially, the Psychological Autopsy is a thorough introspective investigation of the intention of the deceased, i.e. the deceased’s intention to relating to his being dead- information which is obtained by interviewing individuals who knew the deceased’s actions, behaviour and character best enough to report accordingly.

Psychological Autopsy has been best utilised to understand the risks and reasons relating to deaths by suicide. According to NCRB, the total number of suicides in India in 2020 were 1,53,052 which comes to about 11-3 rate of suicide (Suicide and Accidental deaths in India, 2020). NCRB also notes that the burden of deaths by suicide has increased in India – by 7.2% from 2020 - with a total of 1,64,033 people dying of suicide in 2021.

It is important to mention that the attempt to commit suicide has been decriminalized under Section 309 of Indian Penal Code (IPC) in India. Section 309 of IPC states that “Whoever attempt to commit suicide and does any act towards the commission of such an offense shall be punished with simple imprisonment or a period which may extend to one year.” (Indian Penal Code, 1980).

However, with a focus in understanding and de-stigmatizing mental illness, the Government of India updated and passed the New Mental Health Act of 2017. This act states that “notwithstanding anything contained in Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code, any person who commits suicide shall be presumed, unless proven otherwise in any case to have extreme pressure and will not be attempted and rebuffed under the said code.”

While this shift from accusation to helping and rehabilitation is slow in coming but the shifting focus still requires far more intensive focus. Thus, it is not a surprise that there has been a renewed emphasis on understanding the antecedent factors of that above a pressure to commits suicide. The diagnosis of mental illness in cases of suicide has always been significantly higher, for there will always be antecedent reasons from either depression, to anxiety to even severe mood disorders

Thus, the purpose of Psychological Autopsy can be summarized within three questions (Schneidman, 1981):-

1. Why did the individual do it?
2. How aid the individual die and when that is, at that particular line?
3. What is the most probable mode of death?

When an individual commits suicide, he/she leaves behind multitude of questions that may not just be limited to what, when and why. This is where trained human behaviourist like Forensic Psychologist come in, who can estimate with any fair degree accuracy, the kind of mental processes of the victim that likely lead to them committing suicide.

There are other cases, where, while there might not be ambiguity regarding the mode of death; but the “why” of the death may baffle not just the investigators but also their loved ones. The psychological autopsy in such cases becomes a reconstruction of the life that the deceased left behind, the motivations, philosophy, fears, dreams as well as the existential crisis that the deceased may have been undergoing around the time of the death.

In India, it was with sensational case of finding 10 members of a family hanging while the body of an elderly family member was found in the adjoining room that propelled the use of psychological autopsy in understanding the reasons behind ambiguous cases for it was through the psychological autopsy of the diaries left behind by the family members and interviews of the remaining family members that concluded that the hanging of the whole family was not the result of a mass suicide but due to an accident was occurred during a ritual (NDTV News Report, 2018).

CONCLUSION

With the rise in cases with ambiguous deaths and with family members wanting to understand the reason behind the individual death, it of course becomes important for the investigators to find all the avenues to bring closure to the family members who have lost their loved ones. This is where the skills of a Forensic Psychologist can be of immense help; especially when they try to unravel the mystery surrounding the ambiguity of a death.

Thus, understanding the reason behind a death by suicide or a death that is ambiguous in nature becomes vital not just for people who have lost their loved ones and cannot find or but also becomes a

significant aide in the criminal investigation into such deaths. It makes the hard job of understanding the why and providing closure for what seems like senseless deaths, somewhat easier, when one is able to answer the basic simple question behind any death – the why of the death.

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