Forensic Psychiatry

Concept of Psychological Autopsy

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The autopsy (from the Greek autopsia, which means “to see with one’s own eyes”) is a method dating from ancient times.¹ Autopsy or postmortem examination is a process of examination of body after death. Every cavity of the body should be examined even if the cause of death is evident, other areas and organs of the body to be examined to find out any contributory cause of death. Complete autopsy is necessary to corroborate the evidence of the eyewitnesses and the investigations done by investigating officer since a poor autopsy can lead to miscarriage of justice.²

The aims and objectives of the autopsy:²
1. Determine the identification in cases of unknown body.
2. Find out the cause of death.
3. Find out the manner of death whether suicidal, accidental or homicidal.
4. Find out the time since death.
5. In new born babies, determination of viability and cause of death.
6. Preserve the trace evidences and viscera when needed.
7. Reconstruct the accident scene from the examination of injuries as to nature and duration

There are different types depending on the reasons for performing it. The various types of autopsy or postmortem examination are:
1. Medico legal autopsy
2. Pathological autopsy
3. Virtual autopsy
4. Psychological autopsy

Medico Legal Autopsy

Done in the Department of Forensic Medicine on request from police or SDM (Sub Divisional Magistrate), who is the Investigation Officer of the case. The consent of the relatives is not required. The doctor conducts a full and complete postmortem to find out the cause of death and other relevant questions asked by the Investigating Officer.³

Pathological Autopsy

Done in the Department of Pathology on request from the relatives, who are the consenting party. In these cases the doctor conducts a partial autopsy of the organ or cavities where the pathology is suspected to find out the cause of death.²

Virtual Autopsy

It is an alternative to a traditional autopsy, conducted with scanning and imaging technology. It is the application of imaging methods for non-invasive documentation and analysis of relevant forensic findings in living and dead persons.³ Virtsopsy employs imaging methods that are also used in clinical medicine such as computed tomography (CT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and 3D surface scanning in addition to conventional roentgenographic methods. In dead persons, non destructive documentation is important for two reasons:¹

1. It brings information without precluding any other conservative or destructive forensic investigation.
2. It can be used in cultures and situations where autopsy is not tolerated by religion or rejected by family members.
Psychological Autopsy

A procedure used to classify equivocal deaths. An equivocal death is a death in which it is not immediately clear whether a person committed suicide or not (e.g., drug-ingestion deaths, single car accident deaths). It is essentially a mental state examination of the deceased.

A procedure for investigating a person’s death by reconstructing what the person thought, felt, and did before death, based on information gathered from personal documents, police reports, medical and coroner’s records, and face-to-face interviews with families, friends, and others who had contact with the person before the death. Estimates suggest that in up to 20% of cases presented to a medical examiner/coroner the precise mode of death is unclear. A psychological autopsy can help address this ambiguity and establish whether death was as a result of natural causes, suicide, accident or murder.

The Psychological Autopsy Methodology

The psychological autopsy procedure has two main elements:

1. Extensive interviews of family members and other close intimates; and
2. Collecting all possible medical, psychiatric and other relevant documents of the deceased.

Psychological autopsies review the specifics of the death and the decedent for suicide risk factors. Shneidman for example, has identified 14 areas for inquiry in psychological autopsy studies. These areas include:

1. Identifying information (e.g., age, marital status, religious practices, occupation)
2. Details of the death
3. Brief outline of the victim’s history (e.g., previous suicide attempts)
4. Death history of the victim’s family (e.g., family history of suicide, affective illness)
5. Description of the personality and lifestyle of the victim
6. The victim’s typical pattern of reaction to stress, emotional upsets, and periods of disequilibrium
7. Recent stressors, tensions, or anticipations of trouble
8. The role of alcohol and drugs in the overall lifestyle of the victim and his/her death
9. The nature of the victim’s interpersonal relationships
10. Changes in the victim’s habits and routines before death (e.g., hobbies, appetite, sexual patterns, and other life routines)
11. Information relating to the life side of the victim (e.g., upswings, successes, plans)
12. Assessment of intention
13. Rating of lethality
14. Reaction of informants to the victim’s death, and
15. Any comments or special features of the case.

The information collected from the interviews could provide relevant information in an attempt to reconstruct the deceased’s background, personal relationships, personality traits and lifestyle.

Psychological autopsies have proved helpful in identifying and explicating proximate causation, determining the role of a variety of factors in bringing about a suicidal death. Psychological autopsies have been useful in determining liability in worker’s compensation, product liability, medical malpractice, and criminal cases.

Uses and Applications of Psychological autopsy

Types of forensics cases in which psychological autopsy are used:

1. Understanding Suicides: Understanding suicides requires a sensitive under taking. Thus carefully conducting psychological autopsy it will be helpful to understand suicides and its causes in order to develop effective services, thus reducing the rates of suicides.
2. Understanding Personality: By collecting information from people who are in direct or indirect contact it is most likely to describe the personality of the deceased which is perhaps the most significant thing in understanding the thought process and personality of the deceased person prior to death.
3. Understanding intention and motive: It is reflected from suicidal notes and it is
strengthened by history of previous attempts and from history collected.

4. **Criminal Cases:** In criminal Cases Psychological Autopsies have been admitted in US courts to help juries decide whether a parent should be held responsible for suicides of a child or whether a decedent died by her own hand or at; the hand of her husband.

5. **Life Insurance:** As the suicide is viewed as an intentional act, the burden of proof rests on with the insurance company to prove that death was a suicide. Thus an opinion regarding the state of mind of the decedent derived from psychological autopsy will be of relevance.

6. **Institutional care:** With regard to suicide risk, institutions like jails and prisons have responsibility to assess that risk and take necessary precautions against suicide. If the suicide was a result of depressed mental state as result of position of the person at this institutions.

7. **Malpractice:** Systemically conducted psychological autopsy, allows the plaintiff to recover the damages if breach of the standard care to the patient was found to be proximate cause of suicide.

There are ethical issues connected with psychological autopsies. Many ethical considerations have to be taken while designing and carrying out such investigation. They include: taking informed consent from the participants, establishment of mutual respect and ensuring confidentiality of the facts. There can be a legal action if the key informants feel their right and dignity has been infringed.

**Psychological Autopsy Certification Training Program**

It has been developed in 1960, by American Association of Suicidology and refined over years since then. It is a two day, face-to-face training program in the psychological autopsy leading to certification as a Certified Psychological Autopsy Investigator. Upon completion of this training, participants will be able to:

1. Discuss the history and purposes of the psychological autopsy as a postmortem investigatory tool.
2. Identify the procedures used in the conduct of a psychological autopsy investigation.
3. Effectively implement a psychological autopsy protocol and associated procedures to conduct, analyze, and understand how and why an individual died in the manner they did.

**Validity**

While there is certainly evidence to support the validity of psychological autopsies per se, it also needs to be recognized that in general, the term psychological autopsy is neither particularly well defined nor standardized for operational use.

One major concern is that there does not appear to be systematic guidelines in place regarding training and best practice. Another, is that depending on the nature of the case under review, the person carrying out the psychological autopsy may not have the depth of forensic knowledge required to help inform the cause of death e.g. blood splatter analysis.

**Admissibility in Court of Law**

Legal use of psychological autopsies involves investigations of a single death in order to clarify why or how a person died. The burden of proof required during the course of investigations is different from that which is required in court. It may be, therefore that psychological autopsies could currently have a more productive role outside the court.

It is for these reasons that it is probably sensible to view the psychological autopsy as just one of the many investigative tools available within a cause of death investigation.

**References**

3. Thal MI, Jackowski C, Oesterhelweg L, Ross SG, Dirnhofer R. Virtopsy – The Swiss virtual


