

# Psychological Autopsy: A Lead to the Truth Untold

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## Abstract

Psychological autopsy is an important technique of investigation of an alleged suicidal case. The fundamental of *psychological autopsy* is based on the ultra-careful collection of records that help reconstruct the psychosocial domain of individuals. This paper gives insight into understanding of autopsy types and their uses. Relevance of psychological autopsy in forensic practice is highlighted such as validity, admissibility, scope and application in court of law for administration of justice.

**Key words:** *Autopsy, Psychological autopsy, collection of evidence, Court law, Justice*

## Introduction

Autopsy, as the name suggests is made up of two words, “auto” and “opsis” ,meaning self and examination respectively<sup>[1]</sup>. It is the detailed examination of external as well as internal body organs so as to get an answer to questions including the cause, mode and manner of the death<sup>[2]</sup>. Each organ is examined so as to find the answers to the mysteries left behind the dead. Autopsy due to its admissibility in the court continues to be the most important landmark in investigation. Autopsy should be done in a proper manner so as to corroborate the evidences found during investigation, so as to enable justice being rendered to the dead<sup>[3]</sup>. Conduction of autopsy aims at answering the following questions:

1. Cause of death
2. Mode of death

3. Post mortem interval
4. Crime scene reconstruction
5. Identification of the corpse
6. In cases involving newly born babies, still birth
7. Life style of deceased

Autopsy could be divided into six types based on the reason of its conduction. It is categorized into medical autopsy, anatomical autopsy, psychological autopsy, virtual autopsy, medico-legal autopsy and post-mortem examination. Medical autopsy is performed on the patient who dies during the course of his treatment in a hospital, generally performed by a pathologist. The main aim of medical autopsy is to know the effects of various treatments provided to the patient during his life time. Anatomical autopsy is generally done by medical students, so as to understand the structure of a normal human being. It is performed on the body's left unclaimed. Post mortem examination is done generally on the external surfaces of the corpse. Body fluids are collected during the procedure. Virtual autopsy being non destructive in nature involves the use of radiological techniques, such as X-rays, ultrasound , CT-scan so as to know

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about the cause of death, without having any ethical hindrance. Medicolegal autopsy is where suspicion of a foul play occurs. It is done so as to find out the cause of death, as per the request of Investigating Officer or SDM.

### **Psychological Autopsy Definition**

Psychological autopsy also known as psychiatric autopsy<sup>[4]</sup> is conducted to know about the cause of unequivocal deaths. The cases covered under psychiatric autopsy are the ones whose reason for death could not had been clarified. Psychological autopsy as the name suggest, looks into knowing about the psychology of the deceased, immediate prior to the incident as well as of long back in time.<sup>[5]</sup>

### **Applied Aspect Of Psychological Autopsy**

Cavanagh-et-al suggested suicidal cases as the ones that involve a consideration of psychological autopsy so as to know the prior condition<sup>[6]</sup>. Psychological autopsy enables us to know the about the death being actually suicidal in nature or not. In the simplest terms, psychological autopsy tells about the mental state of the deceased.

A questionnaire is prepared for the relatives, friends and family of the deceased, along with searching for information that could enhance the information regarding the mental state of the victim at the time of crime commission. Siddamsetty-et-al found that more than 20% of case being brought to coroner have unclear mode of death<sup>[4]</sup>. The cases having suspicious circumstances, where a conclusion could not have been found psychological autopsy plays an important role. It enables to reduce the ambiguity and provide justice to the deceased.

### **Methodology Used For Psychological Autopsy**

1. Interviewing the close inmates and family members of the deceased.
2. Gathering all the personal information about the deceased. Both primary and secondary information

about him is to be collected.

3. Preparation of a questionnaire to found an answer to during the investigation.

Psychological autopsy gives an insight about the reason of unclear by knowing the mental state of the victim based the certain pre- decided factors, prominently know as suicide risk factors, as the autopsy is carried out to know about the death being a suicide or not. The areas taken into consideration includes, the medical status, occurrence any mental disorder<sup>[7]</sup>, history of previous suicide attempts, any help taken priory from mental health professionals, personal life issues, ill-physical health, previous family history of suicide, the lethality rate of the method used, general stress busting pattern, lifestyle of the victim, change in lifestyle and the way in which the informants reacted to death. Interview is conducted based on the areas defined above, so as to know about the relevant information regarding the victim enabling the investigator to reconstruct the probable sequence of events, based on responses gathered from the questionnaire.

### **Implementations of Psychological Autopsy**

Implementation of psychological autopsy in the following cases:

1. UNDERSTANDING PERSONALITY: collection of personal information from the family members and close inmates about deceased could enable us to know the probable cause of death. In cases where murder in self defense is argued for, psychological autopsy could act as an corroborative evidence, telling us about the personality of the victim.
2. TO UNDERSTAND MOTIVE: Suicidal notes obtained on the scene of occurrence enables us to know about the intention behind the act, that if whether the act committed was in impulsive action or pre-planned one.
3. CRIMINAL CASE: In the cases involving parents, or, spouse, as the culprit could be solved by

psychological autopsy. Shashi Tharoor was booked for Sunanda Pushkar death case<sup>[8]</sup> in which he was accused for abetment of suicide was confirmed through psychological autopsy. Dexter case, having Steven Lake as the main culprit<sup>[9]</sup> in all the 4 murders, later committed suicide. The case was solved with the help of psychological autopsy.

4. **LIFE INSURANCE:** In the cases involving suicide, the burden to prove it as one, lies on the arms of the company so as to make them free from debt they have to pay to the deceased. Psychological autopsy is performed in such cases enabling us to know about the mental status of the victim prior to suicide.

5. **CARE IN THE INSTITUTION:** In the cases involving suicide having depression as the reason, the state of other inmates is also to be assessed so as to reduce chances of any future incident.

6. **UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE:** one of the most important implementation of psychological autopsy is to know about the reason of suicide. Various studies have been conducted on the validity of psychological autopsy in suicidal cases. Reasons ranging from mental illness to social pressure and illness related suicides. Based on the answers provided to the questionnaire result could be found out. Ortigo KM-et-al and Isometsa ET suggested as one of the major reason for suicide as found by psychological analysis<sup>[10]</sup> is personality disorder.

The ethical considerations though come into play while considering psychological autopsy. A prior form is signed to maintain the right for dignity and if infringement is felt the process is stopped there and then.

### Validity

Psychological autopsy is the major key to find out the reason for the death in cases involving suicide. But its validity is still under question due to an undefined set of rules and regulations to be followed during the procedure. The next concern relative to its validity

lies in the incompetency of the personals conducting the autopsy, might be having low forensic expertise and so can miss out important case related facts.

### Admissibility

Considering the admissibility of psychological autopsy is of significant value in the cases where progression through other evidences is not possible. Generally serves as corroborative evidence, providing a sensible lead for investigation, acting as a golden standard in investigation.

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