

Application of Equivocal Death Psychological Autopsy for Investigation: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT:

Forensic Psychology is that branch of applied psychology which is concerned with the collection, examination and presentation of evidence for judicial purposes. Forensic Psychological Evaluation has contributed significantly as an aid to investigation in many sensitive cases. There are various subfields of Forensic Psychology and one such technique is that of Psychological Autopsy. Psychological Autopsy is an extremely important tool in ascertain the mental status of any individual before his or her death. This tool throws light on various facts which may have been missed during investigation. Equivocal death Psychological Autopsy is useful in aiding investigation process especially in controversial death. The technique of Equivocal death Psychological Autopsy is relatively new in India and this particular technique was applied during investigation process for a case referred where there was a controversy in terms of investigating agency claiming it to be a case of suicide while the family of deceased claimed it to be case of homicide.

Keywords: *Equivocal Death Psychological Autopsy, Victimology, Forensic Psychology*

INTRODUCTION:

Forensic Psychology deals with application of principles of human behavior and cognition to legal civil and criminal delivery system. It is also the scientific discipline dealing with the understanding of factors which culminate in the expression of violent and legally unacceptable behavior which brings the perpetrator of the actions under the focus of law and need for specialized rehabilitation. Changing crime scenarios especially related to organized crime at national and international domains have brought huge demands from Forensic Psychology.

A forensic Psychologist always tries to understand the causes of criminal behavior. They try to establish link between the crime, crime place, the victim and the offender. However, Forensic Psychologists also tries to work is the areas related to victimology or victim's psychology.

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They also try to understand why a particular victim was chosen as this aspect throws light on the offenders modus operandi. Similarly Forensic Psychologists also performs Psychological Autopsy especially in equivocal deaths.

EQUIVOCAL DEATH PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY:

Equivocal death analysis is by far the most demanding work and equivocal death analyst requires extensive information about victim and circumstances surrounding his or her demise before rendering an opinion (Roy Hazelwood & Stephen G. Michaud, 2001). Knowledge of the victim's personality and behavior is critical to an Equivocal Death Analysis. The goal of equivocal death analysis is not to prove the manner of death, but to arrive at an informed opinion whether homicide, suicide, or an accident most likely occurred. (Oh Yoon Sung 2010)

Psychological Autopsy is a retrospective psycho-social examination of a decedent to the time of his or her death (Moses, 2012). It is an extension of Victimology (Turvey B., 2008) that reconstructs the deceased's psychological state before his or her death. The concept and technique of the psychological autopsy was developed by Dr. Edwin S. Shneidman who defined the psychological autopsy as: "A behavioral scientific impartial investigation of the psychological (motivational, intentional) aspects of a particular death. It legitimately conducts interviews (with a variety of people who knew the decedent) and examines personal documents (suicidal notes, diaries, and letters) and other materials (including autopsy and police reports) that are relevant to the role in the individual's death".(Sampath et.al 2007). Ebert (1987) described psychological autopsy (PA) as a process designed to assess a variety of factors, including behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and relationships, of an individual who is deceased. It was developed originally as a means of resolving equivocal deaths.

The psychological autopsy is a retrospective construction of a decedent's life initiated to get a better understanding of his death. It is used to determine the victim's psychological intent, using interviews and examination of documents to reconstruct the behavior, personality, lifestyle, habits and history of the victim prior to death. (Moses,2012). Psychological Autopsy aids as an investigative tool which is at the outer edge of professional knowledge and practice in that it requires an application of skills, experience, and training to assess a variety of factors including the behavior, thoughts, feelings, and relationships of an individual who is deceased. (Sampath et.al 2007)

There are two types of Psychological Autopsy: the Suicide Psychological Autopsy (SPA) and the Equivocal Death Psychological Autopsy (EDPA). The SPA is to identify which psycho-social factors have contributed to suicide and is performed when the manner of death is unequivocally a suicide; while EDPA is performed when the manner of death is still not very clear. (Dana S., 2008)

According to Canter (2000), a psychological autopsy report is very demanding and time consuming to produce. However, he has also pointed out that the value of the procedure can be enhanced by drawing on as many and as varied direct sources of information as possible.

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Psychological Autopsies are very useful and are also used by the Department of Defense and insurance companies for years, and there has been a recent increase in their use by families who have been denied the receipt of benefits from their insurance company after the death of a family member and now find themselves in court fighting for their benefits. (Bernstein, 2011).

This paper has attempted to portray the importance of the Equivocal Death Psychological Autopsy technique in equivocal death case of a young girl whose death was initially registered as a suicide, however was reinvestigated from the point of view of homicide due to various controversial aspects in overall case.

CASE STUDY:

Psychological autopsies review the specifics of the death and the decedent for suicide risk factors. This paper tried to adapt Shneidman,' 14 areas for inquiry in this case to prepare the report of Equivocal Death Psychological Autopsy. These areas included:

- Identifying information (e.g., age, marital status, religious practices, occupation);
- Details of the death;
- Brief outline of the victim's history (e.g., previous suicide attempts);
- Death history of the victim's family (e.g., family history of suicide, affective illness);
- Description of the personality and lifestyle of the victim;
- The victim's typical pattern of reaction to stress, emotional upsets, and periods of disequilibrium;
- Recent stressors, tensions, or anticipations of trouble;
- The role of alcohol and drugs in the overall lifestyle of the victim and her death;
- The nature of the victim's interpersonal relationships;
- Changes in the victim's habits and routines before death (e.g., hobbies, appetite, sexual patterns, and other life routines);
- Information relating to the life side of the victim (e.g., upswings, successes, plans);
- Assessment of intention;
- Rating of lethality;
- Reaction of informants to the victim's death;

BRIEF CASE HISTORY

A 26 Year old female, was found suspended from the ceiling fan, by her mother. The case was initially declared to be a case of suicide. However, her family insisted that this is a homicide and not a suicide. The case was thus referred for Equivocal Death Psychological Autopsy to gain better understanding of the entire case and to check for investigative leads.

A case study method was used in this study. The Equivocal death psychological autopsy was carried on after detailed study of her personal diary, her PM report, *the Court Petition filed by*

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the family, information gathered from interviews with key informants by means of direct interview and past photographs were utilized as source of information for this report.

The psychological autopsy method entailed reconstructing the biography of the deceased through psychological information gathered from personal documents; police, medical, and coroner records; and first-person accounts, either through depositions or interviews with family, friends, coworkers, school associates, and physicians.

Personal details:

Ms. XYZ was a 26 year old female staying alone in Mumbai. Her parents got separated when she was 5 Years old and both of them remarried. She stayed with her mother throughout her childhood and her adolescent life. She had completed her education up-to A level from Australia. After that she decided to pursue her career in fashion industry and hence came to India for the same. She was quite famous in the fashion industry and did receive awards for the same. She was also considering going back abroad for enrolling herself in other courses. She was a social drinker, but was not reported to be a habitual drinker and has never been 'over the edge'. She was never found to be unstable or having known to throw tantrums after having consumed alcohol. Further, she was not reported to have any significant medical illness. However, it was reported that she had undergone an abortion few months before her death.

Psychiatric History: She was not reported to have any psychiatric illness or mental illness. Further, it has been reported that she had never been clinically depressed and was not medicating herself for the same. However, it is reported that she sometimes use to take sleep medicines.

Past Stressors:

I. Career: She has been through a lot of ups and downs throughout her career. As part of the fashion industry, working conditions are extremely challenging and work at times continues for 18 to 20 hours. Furthermore, one also needs to face lots of challenges and multiple frustrations as it is a competitive field and an individual has to face failures as well as derogatory situations at various times. Despite all these challenges, this girl faced the world without being bogged down by depression or running away from the situations.

II. Relationships: She had been in relationships before and even had break-ups. Post any situations including past relationships, there were never any suicide attempts. However, her recent relationship with an aspiring politician was a cause of concern. There has been lot of conflicts and the girl was verbally, physically & sexually abused several times which was indicated through bruises over her body. She was even cheated by her recent boyfriend. She was also forced for abortion by her boyfriend.

ON THE DAY OF THE INCIDENT:

- She had a good time since morning and went around partying with her friends. She came back home happily and was suppose to go for another dinner party with another fashion designer. She seemed normal throughout the day.
- However, at night there were few arguments between the couple over the phone. After a while she went out to her boy-friends house, came back as she couldn't meet him, though he was present in her house and his servant did inform him that she has seen everything.
- She came back home, changed into her night clothes and half an hour later was found hanging on the ceiling fan in her bedroom.

SPECULATIONS:

- It is pertinent to note that this girl had been through many stressful situations such as being rape, verbal & physical abuse, and abortion throughout her life. These situations did cause extreme distress to her. However, she faced those situations boldly and worked over it proving her resilience with an attitude of 'Never Die'. There was no information regarding her having attempted suicide in the past.
- There was no history of depression as per the records and current information available. However, she was depressed as evident from her diary where she had written about all her past stressors.
- With relation to her career, as per the information from her family, she was happy with her career in terms of working for good brands and at the same time, she was thinking of pursuing higher education. These seemed be some signs of rational thinker.
- With respect to her relationships, she was seriously involved in 2 relationships in the past and both did not work and she was heartbroken at those times. At none of those times did she attempt suicide.
- With respect to her current relationship, she was extremely serious about this relationship, and wanted the relationship to stabilize. However, she was hurt at various times especially when she was mentally and physically abused and also forced for an abortion. It was also observed that even after going through stressful situations such as abortion, being abused, at those times, she did face it boldly.
- With reference to the day of the incident, she seemed to be happy during the day as can be interpreted by her going out and partying with her friends.
- There could have been some stressful situations at night when there was a conflict between the couple. However, no clues were available to study whether the reasons of fight were so serious to trigger someone to commit suicide as she had been through much more in her past. .
- It is also important to understand and note that the motive for committing a suicide is still not clear. She did not seemed to be under depression, certainly she was depressed and upset many times in her life but none of those times has she attempted suicide even once.

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- Further, if in reality it was a case of suicide, the action may have been an impulsive one which is derived from facts that:
 - a. No suicide note found
 - b. Further, If she wanted to commit suicide because of what she had seen at her boyfriend's house, she should have committed suicide immediately after coming home. It is noted that even after coming back she has changed to her night dress, removed her make-up. These actions certainly did not support actions of an individual whose thoughts are preoccupied with committing suicide.
- Considering all the above points, the possibility of homicide cannot be ruled out completely.

CONCLUSION:

Psychological Autopsy is an important and a valuable tool for aiding the investigation. This report provides detailed information about an individual's death using various sources and brings out new points that could have been missed during the initial investigation process. This technique provides investigating agency a direction in equivocal deaths there by attempting to give justice to the victim.

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