

REVIEW PAPER

Investigative interface of psychological autopsy in forensic psychology: enhancing criminal investigation and justice delivery

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ABSTRACT

Death investigations become difficult in determining equivocal or undetermined deaths. Psychological autopsies and behavioural analyses are usually done for undetermined or equivocal deaths to distinguish whether this death is the result of suicide, an accident, or murder. It serves as a vital investigative tool to reconstruct the pre-mortem state of mind and the intention of the deceased, helping to clarify whether the act was deliberate or unintended. This becomes especially significant in legal contexts, such as trials where insurance benefits or criminal responsibility are disputed. Courts frequently face the challenge of assessing how mental disorders may have influenced an individual's ability to form intent, and each case is therefore evaluated on its unique psychological and evidentiary circumstances. Most Western countries have already developed psychological autopsy protocols and used them as credible evidence to solve undetermined cases. Given the rising suicide rates in India, we should regard the implementation of psychological autopsies as a crucial investigative method. Despite the approval of psychological autopsy in India, its legal acceptability in forensic investigation remains uncertain, which raises concerns about the effectiveness of this method in addressing the rising suicide rates and understanding the underlying factors contributing to these tragedies.

Keywords: Homicide-suicide, forensic psychology, psychological autopsy, criminal justice, law.

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INTRODUCTION

Across the world, day-to-day crime continues to evolve on a large scale, encompassing a spectrum that ranges from conventional blue-collar offences, such as theft, assault, and homicide, to more sophisticated white-collar crimes, including fraud, corruption, and cybercrime. Rapid social, economic, and technological changes have not only transformed traditional patterns of offending but have also introduced new challenges for

law enforcement and the justice system, such as the need for updated training, resources, and strategies to address these evolving crime trends effectively. Following the NASH categories of death, mortality may arise from natural causes, accidents, suicide and homicide; in some cases, it remains undetermined and unsolved (equivocal death).¹ Among them, suicide is a global public health concern, accounting for over 727000 deaths annually.² Within this diverse landscape, violent crimes

INTERPLAY BETWEEN FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY AND LAW

and mortality rates occupy a particularly critical position due to their profound social impact and the intense emotional, legal, and investigative concerns they generate. While medico-legal examinations provide essential biological and physical evidence, they may be insufficient when the psychological or cognitive context of the deceased is essential to understand the chain of events that were responsible for the suicidal incident. The psychological autopsy itself has emerged as a valuable investigative tool, enabling a retrospective reconstruction of the mental state of the deceased, personality traits, and interpersonal dynamics. The investigative interface of psychological autopsy in forensic psychology can enhance criminal investigation and the delivery of justice. This concept can be illustrated in the following incident, where the sudden death of a 26-year-old male inside his house was initially classified as homicide by forcible administration of drugs without the victim's knowledge or permission. However, inconsistencies at the crime scene and witness testimony cast some doubt regarding the manner of death. Later on, following a comprehensive investigation and psychological autopsy, including evaluation of his suicide note, it was proven that the deceased was going through a phase of severe depression due to stressful interpersonal relationships and financial issues, which led him to take such a drastic step. Hence, a psychological autopsy in forensic psychology can help to bridge the gap between investigative findings and psychosocial factors, which can clarify uncertainties, distinguish between suicide and homicide (intentional or accidental), and offer insights that strengthen both investigative validity and judicial outcomes. This article discusses the role and methodological foundations of psychological autopsy in clarifying the causes of ambiguous deaths. It proposes its application as a supportive tool in forensic investigations to enhance criminal investigation and justice delivery.

Law and psychology are two distinct paths in their own realms, but their overlap is so impactful when they meet. Psychology is the scientific analysis of the behaviour, mental state, and actions of both humans and animals.³ When these psychological principles are systematically applied within legal settings to understand criminal behaviour, assess intent and evaluate credibility, then they explain how forensic psychology interplays with the law. In cases of undetermined or equivocal deaths, additional investigative depth is required to evaluate the complete background information of the deceased. So, this field itself enables one to provide more structured information to make decisions about the reasons behind the death. Psychological autopsy (PA) is another subsection of forensic psychology. It is not like a routine autopsy procedure; instead, it unearths the questions of “what”, “who”, “why”, and “how” behind a death in undetermined situations. Simultaneously, expert opinions from psychiatrists or mental health professionals based on a Mental State Examination (MSE) serve as more reliable tools to assist the legal decision-making process alongside the adoption and application of the psychological autopsy technique in these cases.⁴ In turn, forensic psychology contributes foundational theories and behavioural assessment models in civil and criminal cases, which involve narco-analysis (truth-serum test), polygraph (lie-detector test) and brain mapping.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

A psychological autopsy (PA) is a specialised postmortem investigative technique employed within forensic, clinical, and legal domains to retrospectively reconstruct the psychological state, behavioural patterns, and psychosocial circumstances of an individual

before death, unlike conventional medico-legal autopsies, which emphasise anatomical or toxicological findings.⁵ It relies on indirect yet circumstantial and testimonial evidence such as suicide notes, police and coroner records, psychiatric histories, personal correspondence, and collateral interviews with relatives or close associates to evaluate probable intent behind the incident and cognitive-emotional functioning. Psychological autopsy is particularly used in cases where conventional forensic evidence (pathological or physical evidence) fails to provide clarity to differentiate alleged suicidal, accidental, and homicidal death. Usually, two kinds of PA are done: the Suicide Psychological Autopsy (SPA) and the Equivocal Death Psychological Autopsy (EDPA).⁶ SPA is carried out for psychological reconstruction when the death of the deceased is doubtfully a suicide. In contrast, EDPA is conducted when the mode of death is unclear at the time of the investigation. Psychological autopsies (PAs) serve as a vital supplementary tool in the investigation of deaths where conventional medico-legal evidence is insufficient to conclusively determine whether the mode of death was suicidal, homicidal, accidental, or natural. In this scenario, PA aims to infer the mental status, behavioural tendencies, and psychosocial environment of the deceased in the period preceding their deaths. This is accomplished through the systematic analysis of multiple databases, including medical and psychiatric records, judicial records, socioeconomic and cultural background, police and coroner documentation, crime scene photographs, and personal notes or digital traces, as well as collateral interviews conducted with relatives, colleagues, and other key informants who knew the victim.^{7,8} Using structured theoretical frameworks drawn from personality psychology, suicidology, stress vulnerability models, and behavioural forensics, the investigator synthesises these findings into a cohesive narrative interpretation of the pre-mortem motivations and intent behind the incident.

PURPOSE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

Apart from the manner of death (as per NASH classification) determination, there are also several secondary investigative purposes of psychological autopsy. It helps reconstruct the circumstances of death, such as whether the deceased's presence at that location, time, and date was usual or unusual, which reveals whether the circumstances were planned, situational, compelled, or accidental. Another critical purpose is the intent or motivation behind the death determination. It particularly involves the cases of drug overdose and risk-taking behaviours such as intentional, subintentional, unintentional and accidental.⁶ Grieving families often wrestle with feelings of guilt or confusion about what might have led to death in cases of suicide or suspected homicide. By providing a vivid picture of the mental state of the deceased, a psychological autopsy can provide some closure, which helps families understand what actually happened. For families, psychological autopsy offers more than information – it provides relief, clarity and understanding.

APPLICATION OF THE “LAW OF INDIVIDUALITY” IN PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSIES

The Law of Individuality, the most basic principle in forensic science, emphasises that every individual is distinct from others, even though they appear similar. In a psychological autopsy, this principle emphasises the need to reconstruct the decedent's distinct psychological and behavioural profile by considering unique patterns of thought, coping mechanisms, external factors, and stress responses. Thus, investigators can differentiate between superficially similar deaths, such as suicide and accidental fatalities (Figure 1). Applying the Law of Individuality ensures a case-specific approach, enhancing the accuracy, reliability, and integrity of forensic evidence of psychological autopsy findings.

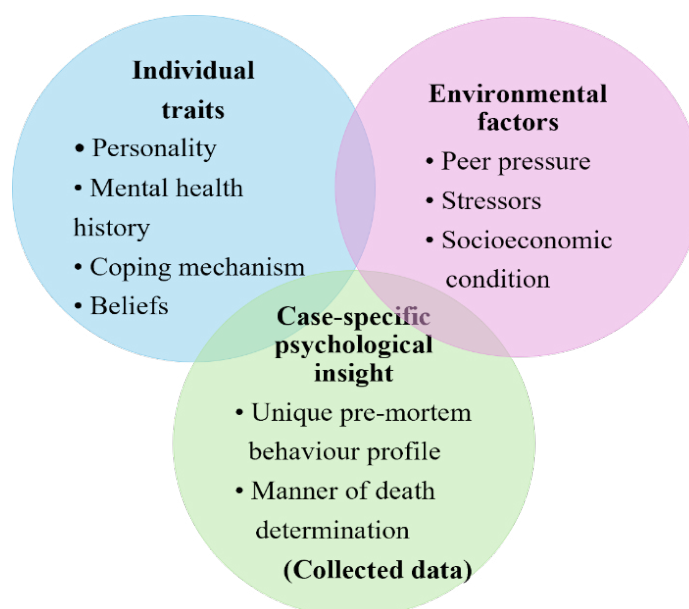


Figure 1: Integrative framework for psychological autopsy based on the Law of Individuality (how the law of individuality ensures that the psychological autopsy procedure varies from case to case based on unique personality, contextual and evidentiary factors)

METHODOLOGY OF CONDUCTING A PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

The workflow of conducting a psychological autopsy involves the systematic collection and evaluation of information from multiple possible sources connected with the deceased, with careful attention to ethical standards. This criterion includes several keys (Figure 2):

1. *Ethical consideration*

Addressing ethical considerations, a major primary concern and highly sensitive aspect, is crucial before initiating the investigation process. Maintaining the dignity and integrity of the deceased throughout the investigative process is crucial to avoiding stigmatisation. Informed consent must be obtained from all interviewees before the interview. Confidentiality, anonymity, and sensitivity toward survivors are essential, and investigators must maintain the individual's rights and privacy. In addition, they should always avoid leading, assumptive questions when interrogating.

2. *Personal Identification*

It plays an essential role in case reconstruction. Information, including name, age, address, gender, occupation, marital status, living arrangements, cultural or religious affiliations, and other details, is important.

3. *Scene of occurrence*

A crime scene always leaves a clue in every case. A detailed examination of the death scene is always important, including accessibility, body positioning, the presence of instruments or chemicals, an unusual smell, the displacement of objects, and any signs of struggle.

4. *Pre-mortem behaviour*

Examination of activities and interactions of the deceased in the hours and days preceding death. Identification of sudden behavioural shifts, impulsivity, and any recent stressors leading to a manic or depressive state of mind.

5. *History of deceased*

Review of medical and psychiatric history, including diagnoses, treatment adherence, and

psychotropic medication use. Evaluation of past suicide attempts, self-harm incidents, and their outcome.

6. Medical Background

Forensic psychology always reminds us that behind every act of desperation lies a story written in both neurones and genetics. So genetic and hereditary predispositions to mental illness or neurological conditions are one crucial piece of information. Sometimes, a family history of suicide, high-risk behaviour, domestic violence, or any other other past trauma increases the plausibility of self-destructive intent.

7. Personality and daily living

Long-term personality traits (e.g., impulsivity, perfectionism, dependence, avoidance, and aggression); coping mechanisms; emotional regulation tendencies; and religious or cultural factors, which help to determine whether the death arises from an intentional or accidental cause.

8. Stress reactivity⁹

Identification of transient and persistent stressors such as job loss, academic failure, legal conflicts, divorce, peer pressure, parental neglect, and interpersonal conflict, which severely affect emotional disequilibrium.

9. Substance use or abuse

History of psychoactive substance (alcohol, cannabis, illicit drugs, stimulants, and barbiturates) use or accidental overdose (including prescribed/non-prescribed drugs) silently works as an unrecognised factor for equivocal death.

10. Cognitive contents

This involves analysing an individual's verbal or symbolic expressions of preoccupation with death, including fantasies, dichotomous thinking, suicidal ideation, and prior cognitive impairments.

11. Statement from informants

Testimonies from family members, friends, colleagues, and other relevant individuals associated with the deceased are highly important. The interview should be conducted between six and twelve months following the suicide, and its duration should be for forty-five to sixty minutes.¹⁰

12. Collection of evidence

Tangible/trace evidence, the existence of suicide notes (in this case, it's more important to consult a forensic document examiner to determine the integrity of the suicide note), medicolegal autopsy findings and injury assessment may reveal adequate information.

13. Integration and triangulation

A systematic cross-examination of all obtained information and the formulation of risk patterns help construct a relevant explanatory model of the victim's mental state before death.

14. Manner of death determination

Information from all these domains helps to determine the details of death (whether it is suicidal, accidental, natural or homicidal) and provides critical insight into legal implications.

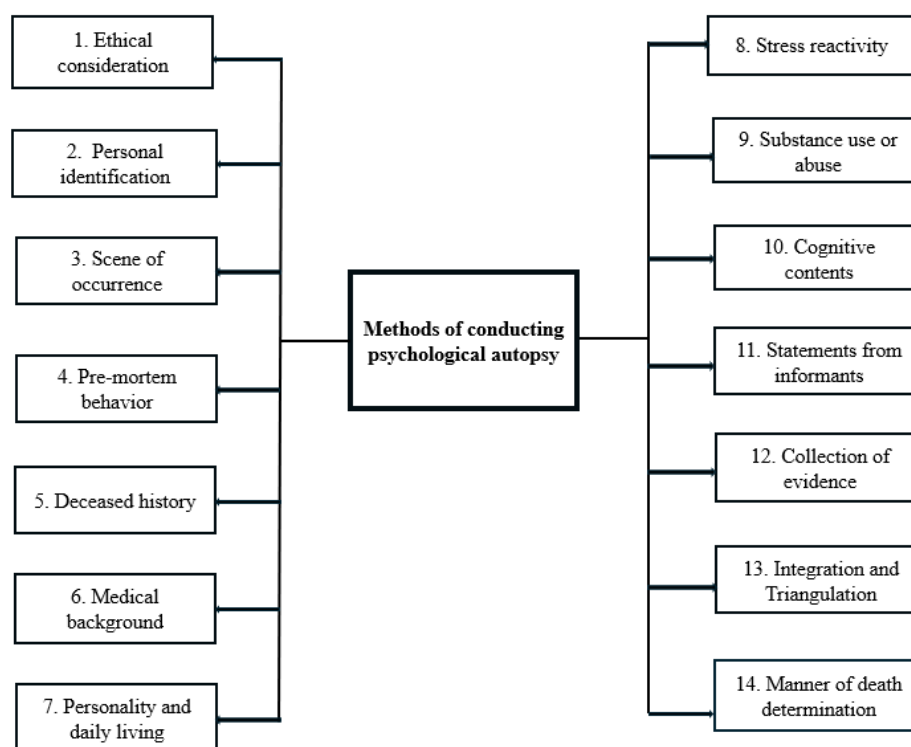


Figure 2 Multifactorial assessment framework in psychological autopsy (PA) for forensic evaluation in undetermined or equivocal deaths

LEGAL STATUS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY IN INDIA

The UK, USA, Australia, and China—such Western countries—have already acknowledged and accepted the significance of psychological autopsies as indispensable corroboration in death investigations. In India, as per records, the first psychological autopsy was conducted in Kerala in the suicide of CM Abdulla Moulavi (2010), a highly revered Muslim spiritual leader, which concluded that the deceased most likely committed suicide.¹¹ Also, in the Sunanda Pushkar case (2014), the Special Investigative Team (SIT) suggested that she committed suicide due to interpersonal conflict.¹²

Although a psychological autopsy report was not admissible in court in these cases, because under the Indian Evidence Act (1872), a psychological autopsy is classified as an expert opinion, like the lie detection test, which is also

inadmissible as evidence in an Indian court, information collected during a psychological autopsy procedure is primarily used as corroborative evidence in legal proceedings, aiding in minimising the suspect pool and facilitating the effective administration of justice.¹³ A forensic psychologist plays a crucial role in the legislative and judicial process by providing fact-based interpretations derived from detailed assessment and in-depth interviews of the suspects, serving as an expert whose contributions act as corroborative evidence that aids in legislative decision-making. Some of India's most significant criminal cases have demonstrated an intersection between psychology and forensic science, such as the Burari death case (2018) and the Sushant Singh Rajput case (2020), to establish the cause of death.¹⁴ However, the admissibility of psychological autopsies as evidence in court is currently governed in India by section 329 of

BNSS (section 293 of CrPC) and 39(1) of BSA (section 45 of IEA), where they are labelled as 'expert opinion', and their acceptance depends upon judicial scrutiny.^{6,7}

Limitations: A few limitations of psychological autopsies (PAs) include: reliance on potentially biased testimonial evidence from friends and relatives; a lack of standardised techniques across jurisdictions; the influence of time on memory accuracy and reliability; and the absence of legal mandates for psychological autopsies in the Indian Constitution.

Recommendations: A psychological autopsy is important for both criminal and civil justice systems, and certain measures are necessary to improve its accessibility and admissibility.

1. Standardised protocols are essential for consistent data collection and interview procedures. The implementation of the PASIC (Psychological Autopsy Structured on Individual Cases) in Western countries in 2021 serves as a beneficial example,¹⁵ with India advocating for its adoption to enhance psychological autopsy practices.
2. Specialised training programmes should provide targeted instruction for professionals on technical skills, protocols, ethical considerations, consents, and interpersonal competencies essential for handling sensitive enquiries.
3. Develop a global database of psychological autopsy cases to identify patterns in ambiguous deaths and serve as an educational resource for training researchers and investigators using real-life examples.
4. Collaboration with legal authorities is essential to establish clear guidelines for the admissibility of psychological autopsy reports, aiming to reduce risks of falsification and overinterpretation in court.

CONCLUSION

Psychological autopsy is crucial for the judicial system, as it aids in determining the circumstances surrounding equivocal or undetermined deaths. It provides clarity on the deceased's emotional and mental state, helping families find closure. Additionally, it offers insights into the individual's struggles, promoting justice for victims, and plays a role in suicide prevention by assessing risk factors. Implementing a training program on psychological autopsy broadens its use in clinical and forensic contexts, establishing it as a vital tool in forensic psychology that enhances criminal investigations and justice delivery.

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