

Psychological Autopsies Equivocal Deaths and Suicides

A psychological autopsy is most often referenced in relation to an equivocal death investigation. In making clear the circumstances of death, it is important to develop this victimology. Part of the purpose is to determine if the elements of suicide exist or not. It is not an attempt to try and determine the decedent's "final thoughts" – only their capabilities and final actions. There are four elements to Suicide:

1. Intent to commit the act knowing that it may result in their death;
2. Knowledge of the instrument used and that it may cause death;
3. History of attempts, ideation or documented evidence supporting Suicide; and
4. Evidence of contributing factors to the act.

We can find several answers to the victimology within the official records, reports and photographs. This would include statements of family, friends and colleagues, information from treating physicians and therapists, prescription medication treatments, hospitalizations and admissions, and other non-victim provided data. From the decedent we can learn from their writings and communications, and from viewing their living and work environments, including via photographs. We can also make some determinations based on the method of suicide and any previous ideations and attempts, and locations. Were they concerned about their appearance or who would find them? Would they normally be, but the circumstances of death conflicted with other known information? This information is part of and enhances the independent investigation.

The psychological autopsy, or victimology, is best described as looking into a person's mind and lifestyle to determine why and how he or she died. We are often looking for the probability of a person being susceptible to influence by other persons, life circumstances, and their environment.

The Psychological Autopsy Interview

As part of the process a theory may develop as to what did or did not happen. The investigative process should be fluid enough to accept when a theory is wrong and forge ahead when it is correct. It is not actually trying to prove a theory, but instead prove or disprove individual facts or elements of the theory. Regarding the history of a decedent, the following are three criteria to be considered as part of the investigative and interview processes. This is a partial list of one more extensive and developed over more than a decade of these investigations:

- Previous ideations and attempts;
- Unusual and change in behavior patterns;
- History of violence, substance abuse, mental health disorders, or other non-conforming behavior;

It is important to ask the questions or find the information that will answer the imperative questions. Include those that you might add based upon your own experiences and case specifics.

The Criteria of Victimology in Equivocal Death Investigations

The following are several categories of areas important in reviewing and seeking answers in the process of equivocal death investigations. For each category there are three criteria. This is a partial list of one more extensive and developed over more than a decade of these investigations:

Preliminary Questions:

- Medical History
- Psychiatric History
- Alcohol and other drug history

Early Investigative Considerations:

- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself or talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself.
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person.
- Increasing alcohol or drug use.

Chronic and Acute Subject Assessment Factors in Equivocal Legal Investigations:

- Personal, Family, or Social Relationship history of similar behavior patterns.
- Present chronic substance abuse.
- Recent and/or elevated legal problems (civil, criminal, domestic, etc.).

Victimology Questions:

- Why did it happen at that particular time and place?
- What were the decedent's intentions at the time of death?
- Were any notes or other forms of communications left by the decedent?

The Questions of Suicide:

- Is it possible that the decedent could have committed suicide?
- Is it probable that the decedent committed suicide to the reasonable exclusion of homicide or accident?
- Are the indications of intent on the part of the decedent consistent with suicide?

Evaluation of Information and Subject Risk Assessment

Nothing is black and white, especially in death investigations – that is why they are equivocal and why suicides are the most questioned. It is important to develop any influences to the decedent's mindset. Investigators have the advantage of not being emotionally connected, and survivors have the advantage of knowing their loved one. The advantage of one is also the disadvantage of the other.

The Ethics of Victimology

Professional investigators have legal, ethical and moral considerations and obligations. In general, being familiar with legal obligations involving equivocal death investigations are the same as other legal investigations. There are considerations as to access to records, as some jurisdictions restrict release by statute or policy in private cases; and the rules of procedure apply as would in all civil, criminal and probate legal proceedings. As morals are a primarily personal issue, those cannot be addressed here. However, it should be noted that many investigators have personal conflicts with investigating equivocal deaths because the question involves suicide, and many have moral conflicts with suicide. The time to decide to accept or decline a case on moral issues is before the client calls – and informing a potential client when they do call. It would be unethical to begin a case, and especially one of such a personal nature to survivors, only to later inform them that you cannot personally continue with their case.

The ethical considerations of conducting equivocal death investigations are also the same as other legal investigations, with some additional specific considerations. It has been noted that it is unethical to recuse oneself from a case for personal reasons, after accepting it and knowing such personal issues could likely arise. Of additional importance is work product and client confidentiality. As many equivocal death investigations are for private clients, there is no attorney related privilege, such as when the legal investigator is retained by the attorney and becomes their agent. However, it is important to treat equivocal death investigations in the same manner. If you have accepted the challenge of these investigations, you have also accepted to learn by investigation the deepest and most personal thoughts and backgrounds of the decedent and their survivors. These may chill you to the core, make you very angry and even very sad. These are not consequences of investigations to take lightly or violate professional ethics.

In the course of investigation and victimology, you must retain in confidence all that you learn. We often give training presentations that involve actual cases. Careful considerations are made, identities and locations are not disclosed, and the persona of the decedent is treated as if they were alive and sitting in the audience or reading

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commentary. Disclosing the personal details of a decedent, or their survivors, is unethical – and personally immoral. We have seen it happen, and we have seen the devastation it can cause. Remember, to the living we owe respect and to the dead we owe the truth. It is as simple as that.

Conclusion

The psychological autopsy is an investigative tool and guide to help determine if the person we are contacting, or whose records – or life – we are examining or analyzing, is being patently or latently influenced, how that may affect their observations and ultimately their actions. Our chosen profession has entered us into the tragedies placed upon them. We do so with skills, processes and compassion for them and passion for the truth.

"We speak for the deceased. To them we owe the truth." AFI-LLC intro video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgsvtbSk8fg>

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