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### K44 The Psychological Autopsy in Practice: Applying Behavioral Science to Mode-of-Death Investigations and a Case Study

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to identify basic methodology and types of data considered in a comprehensive approach to conducting a psychological autopsy and apply information obtained through this practice to a mode-of-death determination.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the possible utility of the psychological autopsy as a collaborative clinical practice tool for establishing mode of death in complex determinations related to alleged suicide.

This presentation provides an overview of the structure and function of the psychological autopsy, a comprehensive, objective retrospective analysis a decedent's state of mind, and actions at the time of death. The history of the psychological autopsy will also be described and a case example will be provided to engage attendees in the process of conceptualizing data obtained in the process of the psychological autopsy and making associated decisions associated with determining the mode of death.

The classification of the mode of death (natural, accident, suicide, or homicide) hinges on the intention of the decedent in relationship to the death. Since its conception in the late 1950s, the psychological autopsy has been used in some medical examiner and coroner's offices as a tool by which final death determinations can be made, particularly in unclear cases of alleged self-inflicted death.<sup>1</sup> In certain contexts, the mode of death may be undermined or equivocal or an outside party protests the death determination. In such circumstances, the psychological autopsy allows investigative principals of behavioral science and specialized knowledge of mental health professionals to be applied to the process of classifying deaths through a comprehensive analysis of many aspects of a decedent's mind around the time of death.<sup>2</sup> It accomplishes this through a thorough analysis of a wide variety of collateral sources (e.g., interviews and personal, educational, professional, and investigative documents) to identify lifestyle and behavioral history, as well as a breadth of cognitive and personality factors that contribute to that history, and more specifically, the decedent's role in the death.

While relatively rare in the practice of most medical examiners' or coroners' offices, the psychological autopsy can provide a unique opportunity for collaboration between forensic mental health professionals and personnel in disciplines integral to death investigations. The majority of death determinations may not necessitate the assistance of mental health professionals, namely because a medical examiner or coroner typically uses the determined method of death as a guideline for the mode of death. Moreover, based on time, cost, and expert availability, a psychological autopsy may not be possible or necessary. Further, some criticism of the utility of the psychological autopsy, both as a research tool and in practice, may contribute to limiting its use.<sup>3,4</sup> Limitations of the practice will be addressed, as well as the utility of a rigorously and objectively approached analysis of aspects of the decedent's life in the context of cases in which the mode of death is in question. Ultimately, it is opined that a comprehensively conducted psychological autopsy may help to elucidate factors contributing to a decedent's intentions surrounding death not otherwise clarified through more traditional means of medicolegal death investigation. Approaches to facilitating collaborations between mental health professionals qualified to conduct psychological autopsies and offices of medical death investigations will also be discussed.

#### References:

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2. Shneidman, E.S. (1994). The psychological autopsy. *American Psychologist*, 4, 75-76.
3. Hjelmeland, H., Dieserud, G., Dyregrov, K., Knizek, B.L., and Leenaars, A.A. (2012). Psychological autopsy studies as diagnostic tools: are they methodologically flawed? *Death studies*, 36, 605-626.
4. Selkin, J. (1994). Psychological autopsy: Scientific psychohistory or clinical intuition? *American Psychologist*, 49, 74-75.

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#### Psychological Autopsy, Mode of Death, Suicide