



K45 The Psychological Autopsy as an Aid to Scientific Investigation: The Application of the Italian Model to a Cold Case Murder

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The goal of this presentation is to inform attendees of the Italian model of the psychological autopsy which is adopted in murder cases and cold cases, in addition to problematic death cases.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by comparing the traditional application of the psychological autopsy with the new Italian model.

Concerning the psychological autopsy in Italy, De Leo et al., beginning with and integrating models of Farberow and Shneidman, Ebert, and Canter, defines it as the analysis of the victim's characteristics and the interactive processes that link the victim and offender.¹⁻⁴ The model proposes guidelines for the analysis of the psychological connection between the victim and the offender and focuses on behavioral risks, relational vulnerabilities, and possible levels of victim-offender connection.

The goal of this study is to determine what kind of relationship there was between the victim and the offender and, consequently, which hypotheses can be utilized for the possible motive and clues about the likely murderer. This study proposes an analysis of possible communicative goals of violent action, reconstructed on the basis of the analysis of the crime scene and other scientific evidence. The investigative hypotheses that emerge from this analysis are then cross-referenced with other findings of investigation.

The psychological autopsy, together with the analysis of violent and communicative action, represents the Italian model for the analysis of unsolved murders and cold cases.⁵

This presentation will describe the application of the model by De Leo in the scientific investigation in a cold case which is well known to the Italian news media. In 1990, the murder of a young 19-year-old girl occurred in the office where she worked. Analysis consisted of review of legal documents, videotapes of television programs in which her sister and parents participated at the time, letters written by the victim, and psychological interviews conducted with her sister and mother.

In the first phase of the investigation, an analysis was made of the contents of documentary material, which was "questioned" with the psychological autopsy guidelines. At this same time, scientific investigations identified the alleged murderer's DNA on the girl's shirt and bra and, via old autopsy photos, identified an alleged bite on the girl's left breast.

In the second phase of the investigation, letters of the victim and psychological interviews of her mother and sister were analyzed to determine the murderer's possible motive and to document the laundry habits at the victim's home.

The identification of the murderer was determined to be the victim's boyfriend. The substantial findings of the interdisciplinary approach adopted in this case led to the boyfriend's conviction with a 24-year prison sentence for the first case, followed by "not guilty" decisions in the second and third case.

References:

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Psychological Autopsy, Scientific Investigation, Interdisciplinary Group