

### I10 Application of the Equivocal Death Psychological Autopsy for Investigation: A Case Study

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the role of the Equivocal death Psychological Autopsy (EPA) for investigation.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the specific technique of EPA as applied during the investigation process in cases registered as a suicide and reinvestigated from the point of view of homicide.

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 the psychological autopsy. A psychological autopsy is an extremely important tool to ascertain the mental status of any individual before his or her death; it throws light on various facts that may have been missed during the investigation. An EPA is useful in aiding the investigation process, especially in controversial deaths. The technique of EPA is relatively new in Italy. This particular technique was applied during an investigation for a referred case in which there was a controversy in terms of the investigating agency and the family in deciding between suicide and homicide.

**Introduction:** Forensic psychology deals with the application of principles of human behavior and cognition to the legal, civil, and criminal delivery system. It is also the scientific discipline dealing with the understanding of factors that culminate in the expression of violent and legally unacceptable behavior; this brings the perpetrator of the actions under the focus of law and the need for specialized rehabilitation. A forensic psychologist tries to understand the causes of criminal behavior and tries to establish a link between the crime, crime location, the victim, and the offender; however, forensic psychologists also try to work in areas related to victimology or the victim's psychology. Forensic psychologists also attempt to understand why a particular victim was chosen, as this aspect throws light on the offenders modus operandi. Similarly, forensic psychologists also perform psychological autopsies in equivocal deaths. Equivocal death analysis is by far the most demanding work. An equivocal death analyst requires extensive information about the victim and circumstances surrounding his or her demise before rendering a knowledgeable opinion of the victim's personality and behavior. The goal of equivocal death analysis is not to prove the manner of death, but to arrive at an informed opinion as to whether a homicide, a suicide, or an accident most likely occurred. Psychological autopsy is a retrospective psycho-social examination of a decedent to the time of his or her death. It is an extension of victimology that reconstructs the deceased's psychological state before his or her death. This presentation attempts to portray the importance of the EPA technique in an equivocal death case of a young man whose death was initially registered as a suicide and was reinvestigated as a homicide due to various controversial aspects in the overall case.

**Case Report:** This case has been tested through the method of psychological autopsy. The case involves a 48-year-old male who was found dead (by hanging) by his best friend. The case was initially declared to be a suicide; however, his family insisted that it was a homicide and not a suicide. The case was thus referred for an EPA to better understand the entire case and to check for investigative leads. The EPA was conducted using a detailed study of his personal diary, his postmortem report, and the court petition filed by the family. Information gathered from interviews with key informants by means of direct interviews and past photographs were also utilized as sources 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, coroner records, and first-person accounts, either through depositions or interviews with family, friends, coworkers, school associates, and physicians.

**Results:** The results revealed that, with deep psychological investigations, the possibility of homicide cannot be ruled out completely.

**Conclusions:** Psychological autopsy is an important and valuable tool for aiding an investigation. This presentation provides detailed information regarding an individual's death using various sources and reveals new points that could have been missed during the initial investigation process. This technique is an investigative approach that provides direction in equivocal deaths and attempts to bring justice to the victim.

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**Equivocal Death, Psychological Autopsy, Forensic Psychology**