Clinical Lessons: The Psychological Autopsy

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The Psychological Autopsy: The *Gold Standard*

- Postmortem investigative procedure to reconstruct the life-style and circumstances of the victim and the behaviors and events which led to the victim’s death.
- Multiple purposes: determine equivocal deaths and/or validate case identification, proximate causation, address the “Why?,” etc.

- Multiple case goal = reconstruction of deaths in series or case-control study to define common risk factors, especially warning signs, and to identify pathways toward death, hence points of entry for prevention...
Objectives

- Overview Psychological Autopsy
- Differentiate Psychological Autopsy from pretenders, lesser procedures, and its cousins
- Using preliminary data from AAS’s USMC Psychological Autopsy study, identify findings of clinical (and prevention) value
- Comparing this data to DoDSER data on same decedents, identify preliminary and clinically useful pathways toward improving the DoDSER
Psychological Autopsy: Postmortem Investigative Procedure

- A psychological biography, that creates a pathway to death, to which the decedent contributes archived documents and close observers contribute observations both distal and proximal to death.

- Distal:
  - Character / Personality
  - Developmental History
  - Psychiatric History
  - Emotional Life and Coping Style

- Proximal:
  - Last Days and Hours
  - State of Mind
  - Intentionality
The Procedure

• Structured interviews by a trained investigator with selected observers
• Site of death evidence
  • Police reports
  • Site investigation
• Archived Documents
  • Physical autopsy and lab reports (e.g. tox)
  • Medical records, mental health records, school records, occupational records, criminal records, financial documents, computer records...
Other Death Investigation Procedures

- Mortality Reviews
- Root Cause Analyses
- Follow-Back Studies
- NCIS Investigations
- 8-Day Briefs (USMC), AR 15-6 (Army)…
- DoDSER
DoDSER
(Department of Defense Suicide Event Report)

- Standardized surveillance system across all services (2008, 2010 Rev)
- All suicides and undetermined deaths where suicide has yet to be ruled out
- Medical and personnel records
- Used to understand factors that give understanding to suicide, hence inform prevention efforts and policy
DoDSER

• Recommendation: The DoDSER must be matured, expanded, and refocused to fulfill [its] surveillance role
DoDSER Methodology/Limitations

- Behavioral health providers, health care providers, or command-appointed representatives
  - Inconsistent in qualifications, training…
- Typically — single interview, personnel records, and, possibly, medical records
  - Minimal use of archived records; family members rarely interviewed…
US ARMY Suicides, 2010
% “Unknown” on DoDSER

- 39% had 5 or more primary data fields missing or unknown

% “don’t know”
- Alcohol used during suicide: 40%
- Hx of prior self-injury: 31%
- Hx physical health problem: 33%
- Hx family suicide: 47%
- Excessive debt/bankruptcy: 42%
DoDSER Limitations

- Does not provide valid and reliable data
- Often relies on data only if command is aware (e.g. weak on family hx)
- Does not focus on acute risk factors or pathway observations
Goal: 2.5 year study: (N = 25 +) 2010-2012 suicides

Aims:
- Learn maximally about USMC suicides
- Identify pathways and warning signs re: deaths by suicide
- Inform prevention
- Improve ongoing surveillance efforts
USMC Psychological Autopsy Study

Examples of Clinically Relevant (Preliminary) Data

- One in three referred for mental health care; only 1 in treatment at time, but adherence inconsistent
  - 80% of those diagnosed with a mental illness were diagnosed BEFORE entering USMC
- Almost all who were in relationship were on verge of breaking up
- One in five were LGBTQ, only one of whom was out of closet
- Passive SI : Active SI :: 5:1
- >50% prepared/rehearsed
- >50% had + AUDITs; all these had + BACs at time of death
USMC Psychological Autopsy Study

- **Acute Risk Factors (observed last *30 days*) [preliminary data]
  - I
  - S more than .5
  - P
  - A more than .5
  - T more than .5
  - H
  - W
  - A
  - R
  - M more than .5
Examples of USMC Psychological Autopsy Study Domains/Questions Not on DoDSER

- Spirituality (vs. religiosity)
- Treatment adherence
- Warning Signs
- Exposure
- LGBTQ status
- Scales of choice: Depression, Anxiety, ETOH use, Drug use...
- Firearm storage
- Risk-taking Behaviors
- Social media use
- WARNING SIGNS
- Follow-up, e.g., if Intent - Yes
Comparative Examples: USMC Psychological Autopsies and DoDSER

- **DoDSER**
  - History of Substance Abuse: YES
  - History of using psychotropic medications:
    - Yes/No/ DK (by type)
  - Timeline to Death
    - Only “Event Sequence” = re “event” (incident) itself

- **PSYCH AUTOPSY**
  - History of Substance Abuse: Delineated response + Current AUDIT
  - Current prescription of psychotropic medications:
    - Yes/No/ DK (by type)
    - Adherence
  - Timeline to Death
    - Last 7 days, Last 30 days
USMC Psychological Autopsy Study: A Clinically Relevant Opportunity

• IF < 50% of suicide decedents communicated SI before their deaths,
• IF, in those cases where SI is not communicated, clinicians tend to merely chart “no SI” and rarely go on to do a thorough assessment and formulation of suicide risk,
• THEN, >50% of those who die by suicide, even if seen by a clinician, will not be recognized as acutely suicidal.
• Can we develop acute risk profiles of those who died by suicide who did not communicate SI prior to their deaths?
USMC Psychological Autopsy Study: A Clinically Relevant Opportunity

- DoDSER

Mental Disorder Focus
- Diagnosis
  - Mood disorder
  - Anxiety disorder
  - Sleep disorder
  - Adjustment disorder
  - Personality disorder
  - TBI
  - Impulse control…

- PSYCH AUTOPSY

Mental Disorders (Ibid)
- Observed Symptoms
  - Rage
  - Confusion
  - Irritability
  - Inflated sense of self
  - Burdensomeness
  - Poor judgment…
Utah Psychological Autopsy Study
(Gray, 2002)

- Ages 13-21 (N = 151)

- 63% of decedents had contact with Juvenile Court System
  - 54% of these had referrals for substance possession, use, or abuse
  - 32% of these had at least one felony referral
  - > 7 Juvenile Offenses increases risk for suicide 5 times

- Hence, a preventive intervention focusing on youth with substance use issues, mental health diagnoses...in juvenile court.
Prevention: Rail Suicide PA Study

- American freight railroads wanting to prevent suicides on their right-of-ways favor putting up signage promoting help-seeking, calling a telephone crisis line #...

- AAS’s PA study of suicides on railroad rights-of-way found that ONLY 1 of 29 decedents, whose possessions at the time/site of death were catalogued by police, had a cell phone on their person at the time of death.

- Moral to the Story: A sign without a phone can’t lead a potential suicide to proactive, help-seeking behavior.
Next AAS Psychological Autopsy Certification Training

- MARCH 25-26, 2014
  - Nashville, TN
- May 13-14, 2014
  - Wyoming

Contact aprice@suicidology.org
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Thanks!

- Follow-up Questions:

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