

The Psychological Autopsy: Applications, Benefits, and Limitations

Invited lecture · Lanny Berman

Happenstance led prof. Berman to become a Suicidologist, when he was invited to join a panel at the 3rd annual meeting of the American Association of Suicidology (AAS) in 1971 and met 'Dr. Karl' Menninger, the keynote speaker, Ed Shneidman and Norman Farberow. More than 50 years later, inclusive of presidencies of both the AAS and the International Association for suicide Prevention (IASP), the directorship on the National Center for the Study and Prevention of Suicide, 9 books and more than 175 published articles and book chapters, the study and prevention of suicide have been an almost life-long passion.

Abstract. The Psychological Autopsy was born more than a half-century ago in a research study, was weaned toward scientific respectability through a series of individual case applications in consultation with a coroner, gained early notoriety when used to help determine the manner of death of Marilyn Monroe, and has matured into its adulthood by virtue of case-control research and attempts to systematize its procedures and minimize its limitations. The presentation will offer an overview of the Psychological Autopsy's history, identify and illustrate its applications and purposes, and discuss its limitations. It will highlight the Psychological Autopsy as a gold standard tool to help determine suicide as a manner of death (versus accident and homicide), to identify discriminant risk factors of suicide, to define points of entry for preventive interventions in community systems and systems of care, and as a tool to aid the process of a survivor's bereavement. Further, it will focus the requisite skill-sets for those conducting Psychological autopsies and the need for training to achieve needed competencies in its application.