



Review article

The postmortem proxy-based interview—future directions

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to provide an overview of the procedural and methodological challenges that need to be addressed when determining the content and application of postmortem proxy-based interviews and recommendations for meeting these challenges in future death investigations are outlined. Preliminary interview considerations are discussed and a step-by-step procedural algorithm for applying proxy-based interview protocol is supplied. A *vulnerability-stress* model is used for organizing the conceptualization of risk and protective factors into domains of theoretically similar factors. Techniques to improve data collected about mental disorders and stressful life events—variables addressed in nearly all psychological autopsy studies—are suggested, and the importance of examining certain understudied constructs (e.g., psychological factors, family history, select situational factors, childhood adversity, and protective factors) is emphasized. Given the convergence of findings across postmortem proxy-based interviews, whereby extracting postmortem psychiatric diagnoses is the rule, the next generation of studies must offer a point of departure from univariate models, by studying *how* and *why* well known exposures interact to produce suicide. In practical terms, targeting specific sub-populations and high-risk individuals can serve as the basis for constructing and testing different clinical hypothesis, which in turn may yield insights into the underlying etiological heterogeneity of suicide.

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1. Introduction

Suicide ranks among the leading causes of death worldwide and is projected to become an even greater contributor to the global burden of disease over the coming decades (Huguet et al., 2014; World Health Organization, 2008). Despite the seriousness and extent of this problem relatively little is known about the etiology of suicide (Rockett et al., 2014).

Fortunately, however, the past few decades have brought significant advances in the understanding of suicide. And while, postmortem investigations have accumulated considerable evidence on a broad range of risk and protective factors it is still unclear *how* and *why* they interact to increase suicide risk (Appleby et al., 1999a; Hawton et al., 1998).

Numerous theoretical models of suicide have been proposed to answer these questions; nearly all of which distinguish between *vulnerability* or distal factors that predispose some people to be at high risk for suicide and *stressors* or proximal factors that trigger suicidal behaviors among those who are vulnerable (Mann et al., 1999). Distal and proximal determinants often indicate an individuals' general predisposition for suicide (Foster, 2011; Moscicki, 1997). They do not, however, capture the fluctuating nature of risk attributed to environmental conditions.

Indeed, the idea that the impact of these exposures can additively, that is, increase susceptibility to changing circumstances in the individuals' life supports the multifactorial approach to the study of suicide (Conner et al., 2011). Illustrating this larger trend, researchers have gathered data on multiple parameters—by identifying the medical, psychological, and the social or environmental circumstances preceding cases of suicides—mostly, albeit not exclusively, via postmortem proxy-based interviews (also known as “Psychological Autopsy”) (Cavanagh et al., 2003; Clark, 1992).

Notwithstanding the rapid distribution of postmortem interviews, and consistent with the notion that proxy-based interviews remain the prime approach in studying explanatory exposures relative to suicide, few detailed methodological guides have focused on the procedures for conducting these interviews or on broadening the scope to include other domains that are illustrative of potential foci.

Addressing these calls, in this study we provide a discussion on some of the most essential matters in suicide research in as far as they may be extracted by the proxy-based interview and extend earlier reports (Conner et al., 2011, 2012a; Isometsa, 2001) in the following three ways.

First, we identify central methodological issues (theoretical and practical limitations) in interview procedures and content domains and outline steps for data collection and evaluation.

Second, as most prior appraisals have concentrated on the utility of extracting postmortem psychiatric diagnoses—contributing to the high emphasis of identification and treatment of psychiatric disorders as the main suicide prevention effort (Conner et al., 2012a)—we suggest that psychological autopsy studies expand their current function beyond reinforcing the evidence-base on the causal link between mental disorders and suicide by providing an overview of previously delineated influences and discussing their independent and cumulative effects in conferring risk of suicide.

Third, we consider some potential new research directions for forthcoming proxy-based research, ranging from the concrete (e.g., studying specific sub-populations and at-risk groups) to those that are less tangible and require more complex solutions (e.g., improving the accuracy of suicide statistics).

2. Methods

Reports included in the following study were obtained through two different search strategies. First, a PubMed computerized database was searched from January 1980 to December 2015 for studies published in English that employed any of the following four sets of key words: “suicide and postmortem interview”, “postmortem suicide risk assessment”, “postmortem diagnosis”, and “suicide and mental disorders and psychological autopsy”. This procedure was followed by a screening of suicide studies that appeared in the reference list of articles that were located prior to the study's inception and their findings are at the core of this work.

As *vulnerability-stress* models inform contemporary thinking about suicide (Mann et al., 1999) such a model is used here to organize the conceptualization of risk and protective factors into domains of theoretically similar factors (Fig. 1).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. History of psychological autopsy

The term “psychological autopsy” was coined by Edwin Shneidman, in collaboration with the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center and the Los Angeles Medical Examiner's office, to refer to a method used to classify equivocal-intent death cases in order to account for their source (Litman et al., 1963).

However, within the last few decades, the psychological autopsy method has shown broader applicability than purely to resolve manner-of-death and has been used as a device for reconstructing a biography of the deceased (Conner et al., 2011). In fact, proxy-based interviews have been used for clinical and preventative ends, to identify and elucidate proximate causation; for epidemiological

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