

Exploring the Prevalence of Psychological Autopsy in Indian Context

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Abstract

Background: Psychological Autopsy is basically done in order to understand the cause of death in equivocal and suicide death cases. It involves collecting information about the individual's life history, mental health history, and circumstances leading up to their death in order to gain insights into the complex factors that may have played a role.

Methods: The main aim of this study is to find the prevalence of Psychological Autopsy (PA) in India and to know how frequently is it being used as a means of investigation through close ended questionnaire of academicians, forensic psychologists, practitioners and trainees in the field of mental health, this study seeks to discover outcomes.

Conclusion: The fact that the majority of mental health professionals had never heard the phrase psychological autopsy, despite the fact that they had used it, was a significant weakness of this study.

Key words: Psychological autopsy (PA), Equivocal deaths, Investigations, Forensic Psychologists

Introduction

We can define *Psychological Autopsy* as an effort to identify the deceased's mental state prior to death. The psychological autopsy is crucial in reconstructing the psychic condition of the deceased person's mind, which in turn enables us to determine whether the death was accidental, the result of homicide, or both. This is a *Reconstructive Mental State Evaluation*, which is an expert request focused on examining a specific aspect of a deceased person's psychological condition at a previous time^[8]. Psychological autopsy is a methodical procedure for assessing suicidal intention in equivocal cases.

The platoon conducting Psychological autopsy correspond of magistrate/coroner, medical officer, psychologist, psychiatrist, psychiatric social worker, police investigating officer, and law enforcement authorities^[6]. And the time period for conducting the Psychological autopsy should be 1-6 months as the collateral information collected from the family and friends may tend to be bias and memory loss can be seen as time moves forward^[6]. A psychological autopsy is done by collecting *victim's medical history, suicide notes, school records, military records, employment records, coroner's report, forensic medical results, police reports, crime scene analyst reports, photos of the crime*

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scene, and autopsy results^[6]. To investigate the circumstances surrounding the suicide, a forensic psychologist may occasionally even be dispatched right to the scene.

In India psychological autopsy became popular during the *Burari death case*, *Sushanth Rajput case* and *Sunanda Pushkar case*^[1]. Psychological Autopsy was conducted in these cases to find a conclusion of the cause of death as well as to find the mental state of the person prior to death. This procedure is constantly the most effective means of giving information regarding the cause and manner of death. It can also be noted that psychological autopsy is complimentary investigation technique conducted by law police, death investigators, or medical examiners. It can be used in assisting their investigation using psychological theories. Various nations, including the *USA, UK, Canada, and Australia*, have already recognized psychological autopsy as crucial evidence in court. Although psychological autopsies are performed in India in accordance with *Section 45 of the Indian Evidence Act*, their legal acceptability is still up for debate because there is no established protocol and no scientific evidence to support them^[10].

Materials and Methods

AIM FOR RESEARCH

The main aim of the research was to find how frequently psychological autopsy is being used as an investigative tool in determining the cause and manner of death in suicide and undetermined death cases and prevalence of psychological autopsy in India. And the other aim was to know how common psychological autopsy was being used in their academics.

DATA COLLECTION

PRIMARY DATA

This study used a closed-ended online questionnaire to collect data from 50 participants, including mental health professionals, forensic psychologists, and academicians in India. The questionnaire aimed to determine the prevalence and use of Psychological Autopsy as an investigative tool. Initially, it was distributed online, and responses were gathered. Later, face-to-face interactions were

conducted with academicians and mental health workers at NIMHANS to complete the questionnaire.

Consent to participate: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Time period: May 2023 to September 2023

Purposive Sampling: Purposive sampling was done in this study by choosing *mental health professionals, forensic psychologists and researchers* who have done prior studies on this topic.

Universe of the study: Across India

TOOLS USED:

Closed ended questionnaire using Google form

SECONDARY DATA

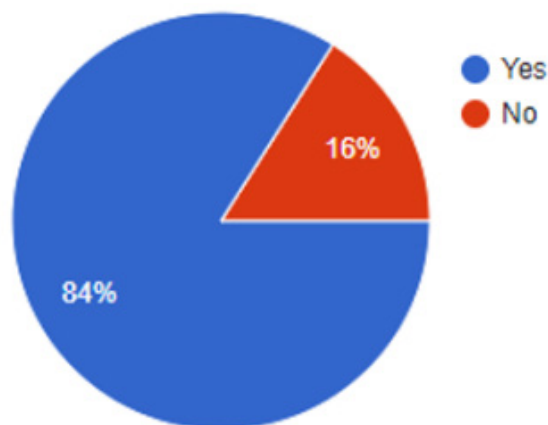
The *secondary data* was collected from various web resources.

Google Scholar, PubMed, MEDLINE

Results and Discussions

Based on the data obtained from the opinion based questionnaire we can see that how frequently psychological autopsy is being used as an investigative tool in India and its prevalence. From the data collected from various mental health professionals, forensic psychologists and academicians we could find the following:

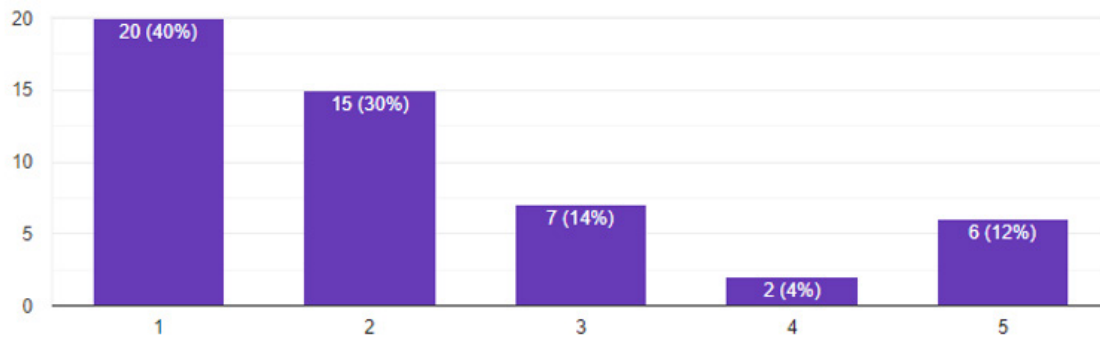
1. Do you have any idea on the term Psychological autopsy?



- **Figure 1:** Figure shows responses of professionals to whether they have any idea on the term psychological autopsy.

⇒ 84% opted yes they have an idea on the term psychological autopsy whereas a low percentage 16% have opted no.

2. According to you, how important is psychological autopsy as an investigative tool?

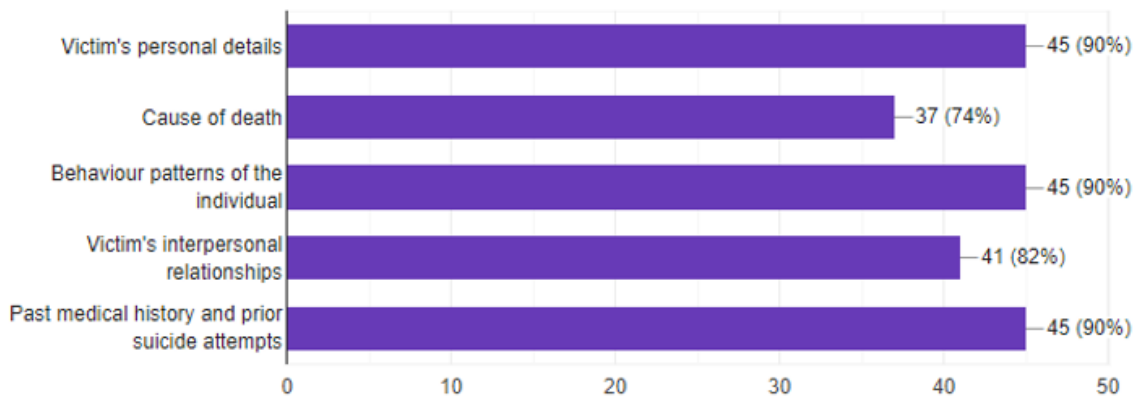


• **Figure 2:** Figure shows response of professionals stating if they know how important psychological autopsy is as an investigative tool.

autopsy is important whereas 16% have said that it is not important.

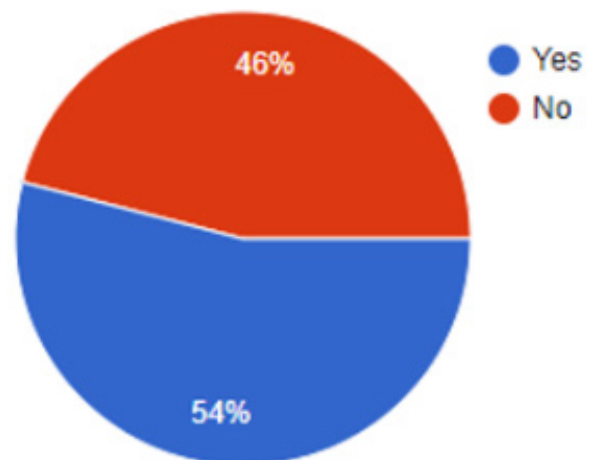
⇒ 70% have responded that psychological

3. What all information do you collect while conducting psychological autopsy?



• **Figure 3:** Figure shows response of professionals on what all information are to be collected while conducting psychological autopsy

⇒ Based on the graph it is interpreted that 90% professionals told that it is important to collect past medical history, 90% have opted that it is important to collect victims personal details as well as behavioural patterns, 74% opted that cause of death details is also important while rest of the 82% opted saying that victims interpersonal relationship details is also important.

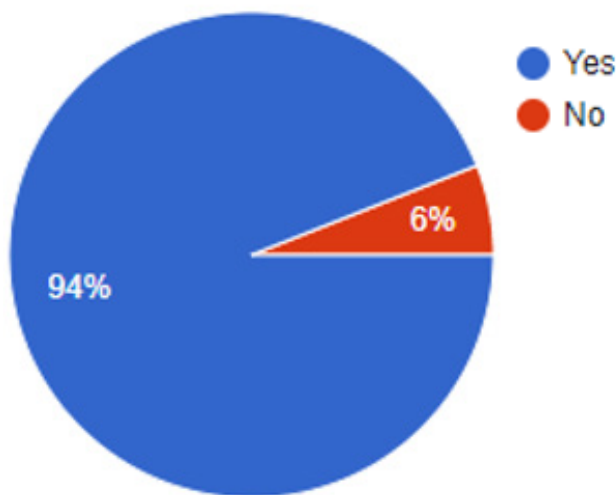


4. Do you know who all is included in conducting psychological autopsy?

• **Figure 4:** Figure shows response on if professionals know who all is included in conducting psychological autopsy.

⇒ 54% of the professionals know who is included in the team conducting psychological autopsy whereas 46% are not aware of this.

5. In cases where psychological autopsy is needed, do you collaborate with other professionals such as other psychologists or police?

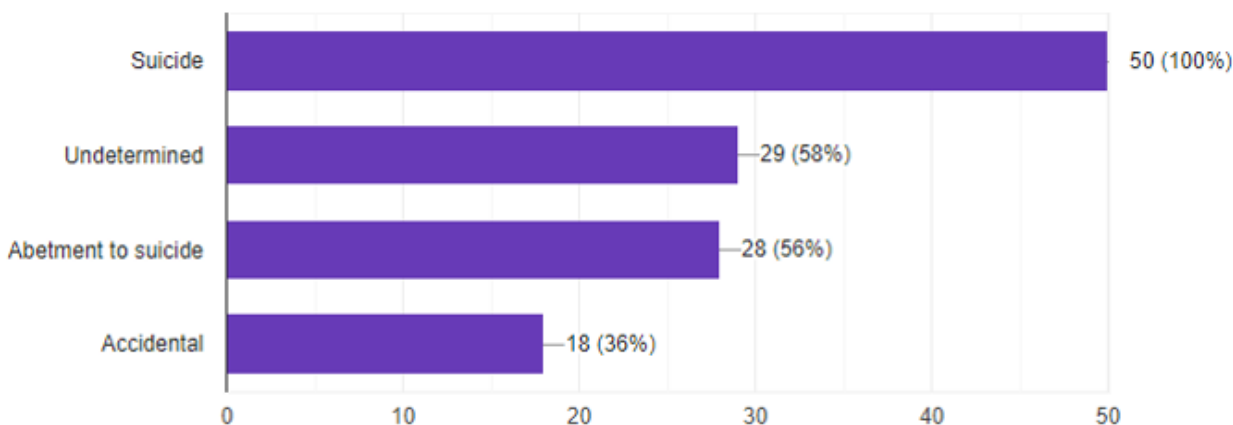


• **Figure 5: Figure shows response of professionals to whether in cases where psychological autopsy is needed do they collaborate with other professionals**

⇒ 94% have opted yes saying they do collaborate with other professionals where 6% opted

saying no that they are not collaborating with other professionals while conducting psychological autopsy

6. In what all cases psychological autopsy is being used?

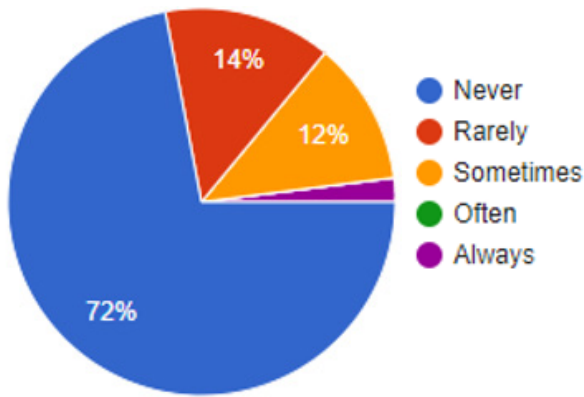


• **Figure 6: Figure shows responses of professionals to whether they know in what all case psychological autopsy is being used.**

⇒ On interpreting the graph all of them have said that it is being used in suicide cases whereas

58% opted saying it is also being used in undetermined cases whereas 36% said that it is being used in accidental cases too.

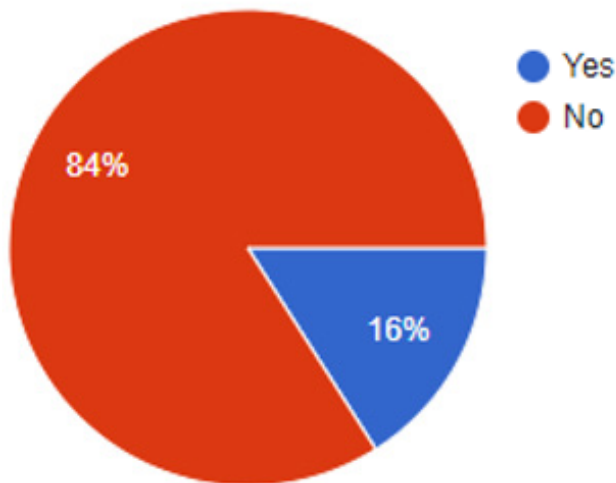
7. How often are you involved in cases that require psychological autopsy?



• **Figure 7: Figure shows response to whether professionals were involved in any case that require psychological autopsy**

⇒ On interpreting the pie chart it can be seen that 72% of the professionals have never involved in any cases that is conducting psychological autopsy whereas 14% professionals are rarely being included, 12% of professionals are sometimes being included and only 2% are always involved in psychological autopsy cases.

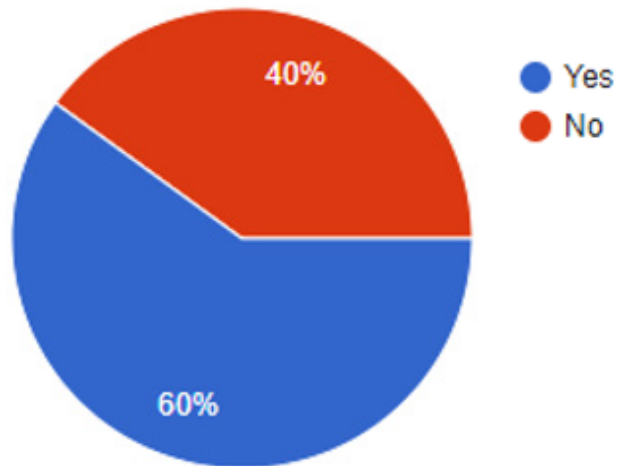
8. Are psychological autopsies commonly used as a standard investigative tool in your jurisdiction or practice?



• **Figure 8: Figure show response as to if psychological autopsy is commonly used as a standard investigative tool in their jurisdiction or practice**

⇒ On interpreting the pie chart in 84% professional’s jurisdiction it is not being used as standard investigative tool whereas in 16% professional’s jurisdiction it is being used as a standard investigative tool.

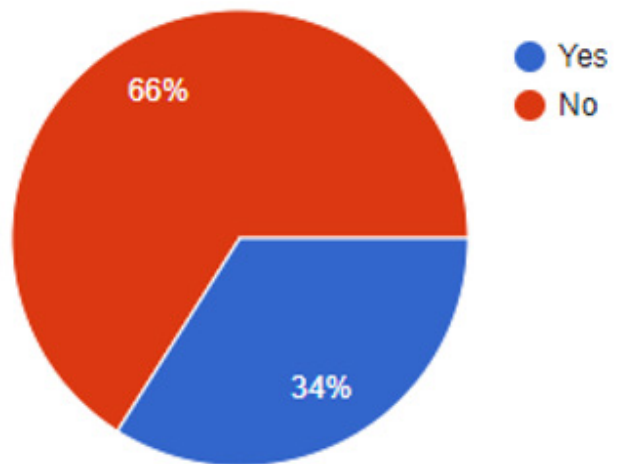
9. Are there any specific criteria or guidelines that determine when a psychological autopsy is recommended in a particular case?



• **Figure 9: Figure shows response of professionals whether there are any specific criteria or guidelines that determine when a psychological autopsy is recommended in a particular case.**

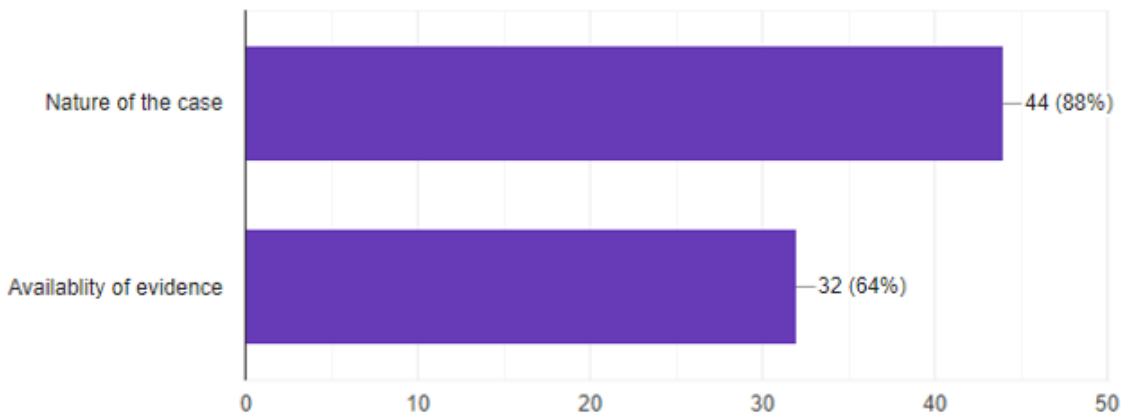
⇒ On interpreting the pie chart 60% of professionals has told there is specific criteria or guideline that determine if psychological autopsy is needed in a particular case rest 40% said there is no such criteria.

10. Have you noticed any trends or changes in the use of psychological autopsies over the years?



• **Figure 10: Figure shows response of professionals to whether they have noticed any trends or changes in the use of psychological autopsies over the years.**

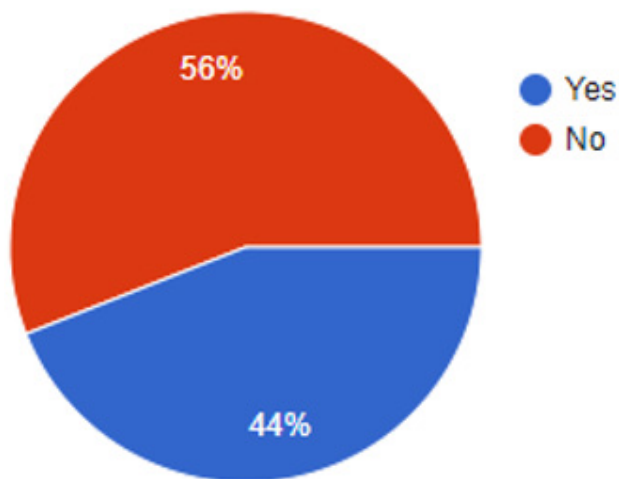
⇒ On interpreting the pie chart it was seen that 66% said there is no change in the use of psychological autopsy whereas the rest 34%



• **Figure 11:** Figure shows response of professionals to whether there are any factors that influence the decision to conduct a psychological autopsy.

⇒ On interpreting the graph 88% have told that nature of the case is an important factor whereas the rest 64% have told even the availability of the evidence is important.

12. Are there any specific training programs or resources available to investigators regarding psychological autopsies?



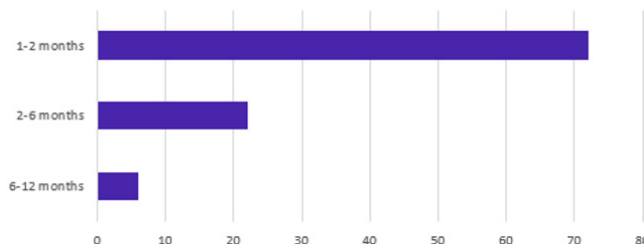
• **Figure 12:** Figure shows response of professionals to whether there are any specific training programs or resources available to investigators regarding psychological autopsy.

said that there are changes.

11. Are there any factors that influence the decision to conduct a psychological autopsy?

⇒ On interpreting the pie chart 56% have opted yes saying there are training programmes or resources available while 44% said that there are no training programmes available.

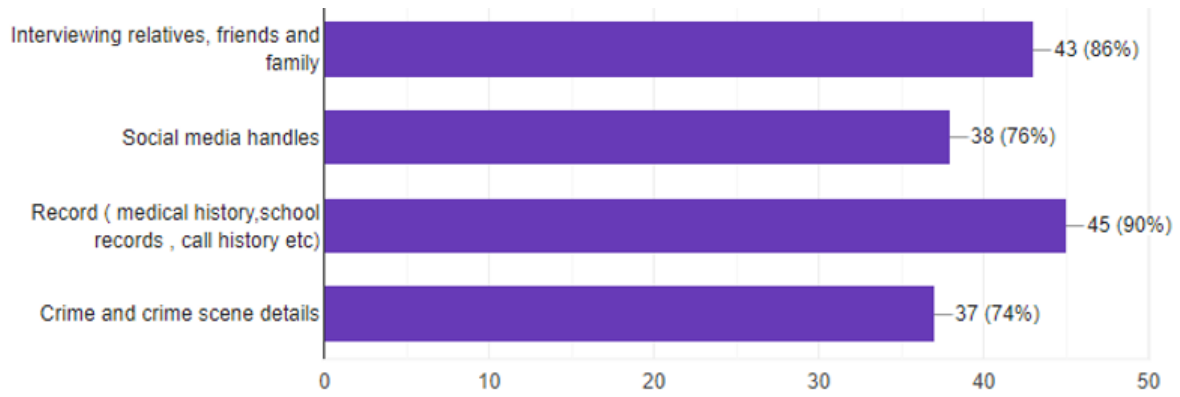
13. According to you, within what time period should psychological autopsy be conducted after death?



• **Figure 13:** Figure shows response of professionals to whether they know within what time period psychological autopsy should be conducted after death.

⇒ On interpreting the graph 72% have said that within 1-2 months psychological autopsy should be conducted whereas 22% have said that within 2-6 months is the time period for conducting psychological autopsy rest 6% have opted saying the time period is 12 months and above.

14. In the cases where deceased is living alone, how is the information collected?

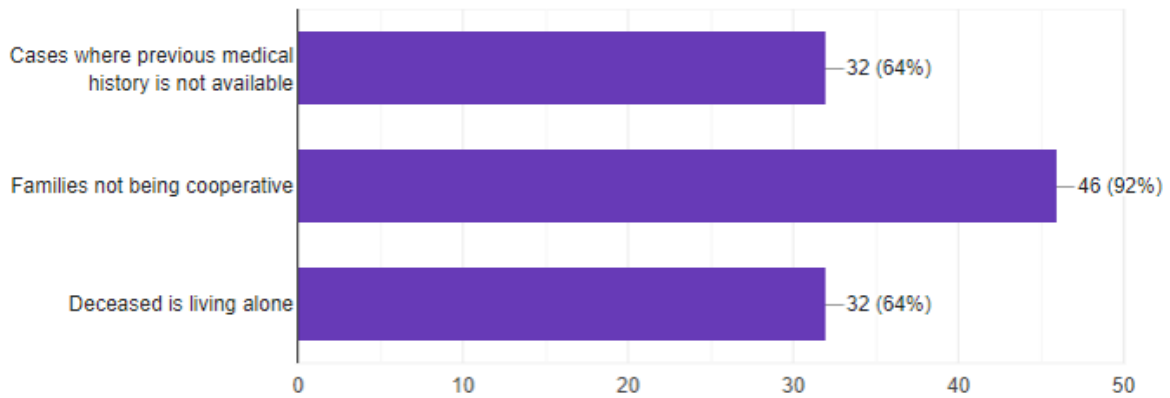


• **Figure 14:** Figure shows response of professionals on whether if deceased is living alone how the information is collected.

⇒ On interpreting the graph it is seen that most of the professionals said that interviewing friends, family and other records are very important, whereas rest of the professionals

have opted crime scene details and social media details collected are important when deceased is living alone

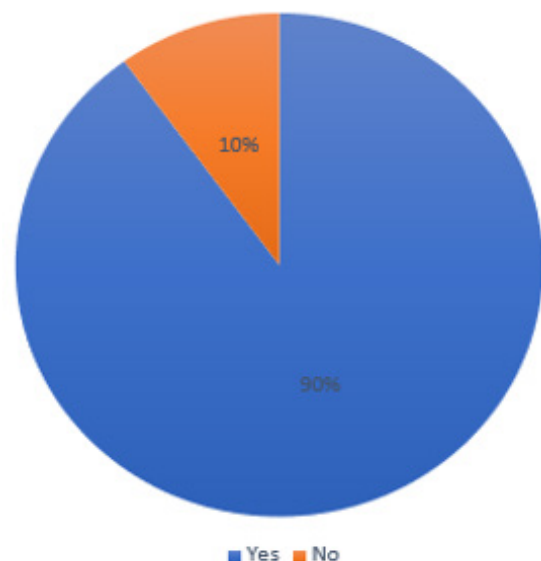
15. What are the main challenges in obtaining accurate and reliable information about the deceased individual’s psychological history and mental state?



• **Figure 15:** Figure shows response of professionals to what are the main challenges in obtaining accurate and reliable information about the deceased individual’s psychological history and mental state.

⇒ On interpreting the graph, it was seen that 92% have told that family not being cooperative is the main challenge whereas more than 64% have said all the three factors are main challenge in obtaining accurate and reliable information.

16. Do you consider potential biases or incomplete information provided by family members, friends, or other sources?

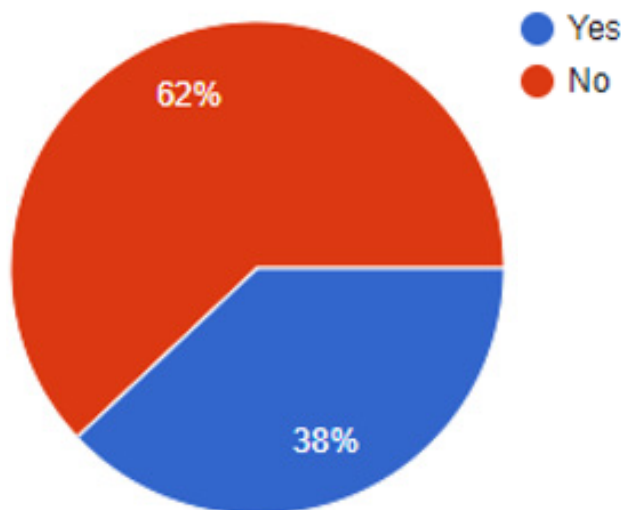


- **Figure 16: Figure shows response of professionals to whether they consider potential biases or incomplete information provided by family members, friends or other sources.**

⇒ On interpreting the pie chart, 90% opted

yes saying they face potential biases and incomplete information whereas the rest 10% opted saying no.

17. Have you encountered any ethical dilemmas or concerns specific to psychological autopsies?

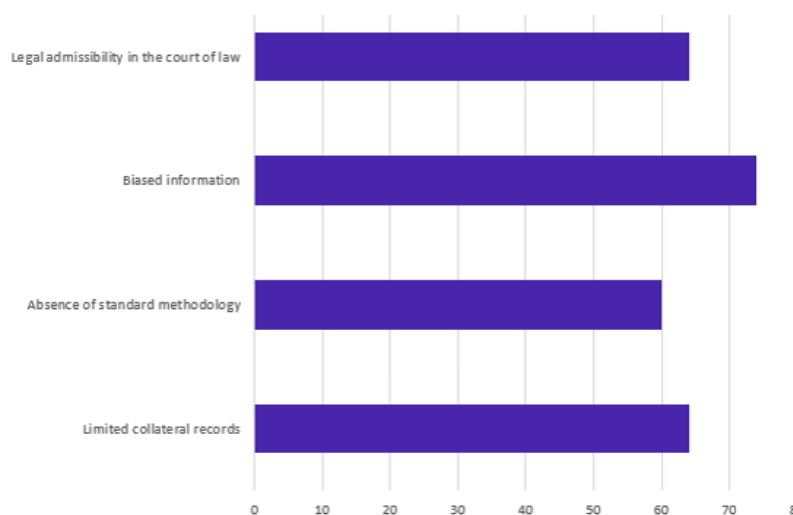


- **Figure 17: Figure shows response of professionals as to if they have encountered any ethical dilemmas or concerns specific to psychological autopsy.**

⇒ On interpreting the pie chart 62% have told that they have not encountered any ethical

dilemmas or concerns rest 38% told that they have encountered ethical dilemmas

18. What are the limitations or challenges associated with conducting a psychological autopsy?

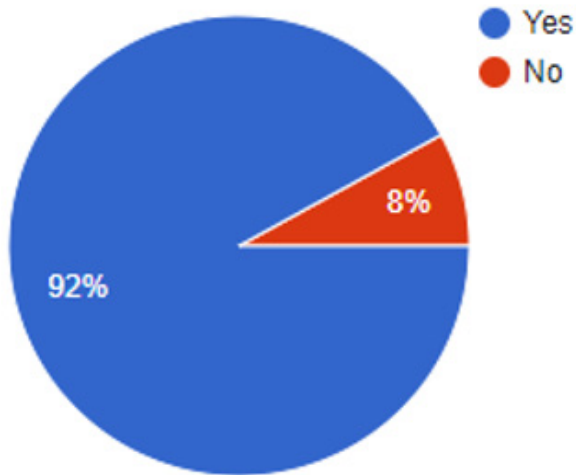


- **Figure 18: Figure shows response as to what are the limitations or challenges associated with conducting a psychological autopsy.**

⇒ On interpreting the graph 74% of the professionals said one of the major challenges

in conducting psychological autopsy is biased information and above 50% of the professionals have chosen all other options.

19. Do you ensure the sensitivity and respect for the deceased individual's family and loved ones during the investigation?



- **Figure 19: Figure shows response as to if they ensure the sensitivity and respect for the deceased individuals family and loved ones during investigation.**
- On interpreting the pie chart 92% have opted yes saying that they ensure the sensitivity and respect for the deceased individual's family and loved ones during investigation rest 8% have opted no.

20. Suggestions given by the professionals who filled the form.

For this question which was optional 28 professionals have responded, important suggestions are:

- Psychological autopsy needs to be explored more in Indian setting in terms of standardized protocol and advancement for its use.
- We need training programs and strict learning standards for the people who are conducting this.
- Psychological autopsy is the area which is still budding in India. Many investigative officials are not even aware of such techniques. Due to which the admissibility in the system is affected

The utilization of psychological autopsy in criminal investigations in India has been noted to be very negligible and very less studies has been done on psychological autopsies in India^{[2][6]}. Hence our study mainly focuses on the prevalence and current usage of psychological autopsy in India. Based on our study 84% of the respondents have a knowledge on the term

psychological autopsy while the others including mental health professionals doesn't have an idea on the term thus satisfying one of the major objective of the study which was to determine the prevalence of psychological autopsy. Another objective of the study that was satisfied was the results obtained regarding 70% of the professionals said psychological autopsy is very important for investigation and other 30 % said it is not important. The relevance of the study is that psychological autopsy is still a new area in India and many are not even aware of this method conduct and there is a need of standardizing the procedure so that it can be admissible in the court of law. Further extensive studies and researches are to be done on Psychological autopsy.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes on the prevalence of psychological autopsy in India and the frequency with which it is employed as an investigative tool to ascertain the reason and method of death in suicide and undetermined death cases. The study also sought to determine how frequently mental health professionals—including trainees—were involved in the investigative process as well as whether they were aware of it. And to ascertain Psychological autopsy was integrated into their academics. This study also aims to highlight the need for extensive study on psychological autopsy. Since the majority of respondents believed that psychological autopsy was crucial, more in-depth research is required to fully exploit this technique's potential in the investigation of suicidal and equivocal deaths as well as to standardize the techniques and procedures, which will aid in identifying the true cause of suicides and undetermined death cases. Through this questionnaire it was also possible to spread awareness about psychological autopsy to professionals who had a very little knowledge on this technique. There is a growing need for more research in this area with a larger sample size.

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Conflict of interest: All authors have equally contributed in this research.

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