The Mass Murder Psychological Autopsy: Considering Subjectivity of Interview Data

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USE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY IN MASS MURDER CASES

- The psychological autopsy (PA) is a "thorough retrospective investigation of the intention of a decedent"1
- Developed in the 1950s, the PA has been applied to known suicides to understand psychosocial factors that contributed to the decedent’s lethal actions
- More recently, used in homicides in homicide-suicide2 and mass murder (MM) cases in which the killer dies3 to better understand destructive motivations
- ~2/3 of US MMs end in on-site death of the murderer4,5
- While common characteristics can inform case conceptualization, it is best to understand a mass murderer's actions individually
- When a mass murderer dies at the scene, by suicide, "suicide by cop," or otherwise, MH professionals may be called upon to perform a PA
- With the public relying on PAs to help understand seemingly senseless acts, the importance of objective PAs cannot be understated

SOURCES OF DISTORTION IN PA INTERVIEWS

"So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for anything one has a mind to do."
—Benjamin Franklin

- As long as humans have existed, they have used irrational thought processes of which they are unaware:
  - ego defenses to shield against painful emotions6
  - cognitive heuristics/biases to simplify complex decisions7
- These irrational processes can lead to inaccurate memories, distorting objectivity of information obtained
- There are also features of the PA interview process itself that can decrease accuracy of information gathered
- Much of our observations all apply to PAs, but here we also specify how the horrific trauma of mass murder cases can amplify distortion:
  - informants may perform the PA to make meaning of the event,8 impacting what is conveyed about the decedent in the process
  - given the overwhelming traumatic impact of mass murder on a community, informants may feel a stronger need to belong and feel connected9
  - to escape pain and feelings of isolation, the informant is more likely to seek to conform to a narrative that is most personally and socially acceptable

REFERENCES

8. Kelly RW. Active Shooter: Recommendations and Analysis for Risk Mitigation. Counterterrorism Bureau of the New York City Police Department, 2010

COGNITIVE SOURCES OF DISTORTION

- Rather than being unaltered videotape-like reproductions, memories are “constructions and reconstructions of what happened”10
- Broadly, there are two major memory mistakes11:
  - errors of omission include failing to create/consolidate memories or forgetting information
  - errors of commission can serve to fill memory gaps left by errors of omission
- In combination, these factors can significantly distort informants’ accounts of decedents12
- Three major time points in which an informant’s memory can omit and/or alter data about a decedent:
  - the time of remembered events themselves (eg, salient events involving the decedent years prior)
  - after the mass murder but before the PA interview
  - during the PA interview
- At the time of remembered events themselves
  - emotional state at the time of remembered events is important to memory development/retention
  - negative events tend to be remembered more strongly than positive events (negativity bias)13
- because retrieval is state-dependent, when a tragedy occurs, memory is negatively skewed14
- After the mass murder, before the PA interview
  - anchoring to media’s early accounts of the MM and murderer, which can be sensationalized and incorrect
  - informants may use availability heuristic, relying on news/social media reports that are the most recent/frequent “reminder” of data about decedents
- traumatic events tend to “persist”
  - each time a memory is revisited it is revised, losing accuracy through the recollection process (‘leveling and sharpening’)15
- in MM cases, persistence—and resulting leveling and sharpening—can be worsened by continuous, inescapable media coverage and community grief
- odd behavior is more common than rare MM
- for this reason, many people who exhibit odd/threatening behavior rarely harm others
- however, PA informants’ knowledge of the MM can lead to retrospective reinterpretation of aspects of the decedent’s behavior as “warning signs” indicating that he would later commit the act (hindsight bias)16
- contrarily, informants’ choice-supportive bias or motivational biases, causing them to frame regret/denial of severity of the murderer’s behavior as unawareness, may be magnified under the intense public scrutiny/blame of MM (esp. true of treaters)

- During the PA interview
  - because the PA interview is yet another verbal recollection of the decedent, all of the above processes can further occur within the PA interview
  - yet four factors specifically shape recollection within the PA interview and are limited to the interview:
    - suggestibility can stem from interviewer’s tendency toward suggestion, shaped by:
      - interviewer’s conscious motivation or agenda, sometimes aligned with the party (eg, law enforcement, family) who hired the interviewer

COGNITIVE SOURCES OF DISTORTION (CONT’D)

- interviewer’s assumptions/premature cognitive commitment
- informant’s social desirability bias (compounded by identification with the interviewer)
- confirmation bias, which can lead to attitude polarization in cases where the interviewer and informant have different confirmation biases operating
- intentional misrepresentation, which can happen when informants knowingly “rewrite” history to make themselves feel or appear better (esp. true of treaters)

PSYCHODYNAMIC SOURCES OF DISTORTION

EGO DEFENSES USED BY INFORMANTS:

- A psychoanalytically-informed approach allows for consideration of information about which informants may be consciously unaware, either fully or partially
- Consideration of ego defenses can be especially helpful when information present in one informant’s account is absent in that of another
- Denial is a major component of Kubler-Ross’ description of grief
- Repression and suppression can obscure information from the interviewer that is only realized upon examination of other sources
- Repression, suppression, and denial may be accentuated in MM cases, as they can protect the survivor’s ego from feelings of:
  - rejection17
  - guilt18
  - responsibility17
  - stigma19
  - shame17
- Projection of an informant’s own motivations and aggressive impulses could occur in an attempt to understand the decedent’s actions
- Such projection of externally-focused aggression is unlikely in cases of decedent suicide without murder

DYNAMIC FACTORS IN PA INTERVIEWS:

- Transference
  - Interviewers may notify informants that the purpose of the interview is not treatment
  - informants, upon speaking to a listening, caring professional, often subconsciously “slip” into a treatment-like interaction20 and can develop strong transference
  - informants may identify with interviewers and unconsciously attempt to convey beliefs/feelings that they perceive (correctly or not) are consistent with the interviewer’s beliefs about the decedent

- Countertransference
  - displacement of interviewers’ feelings (eg, anger or disgust) about the decedent onto informants, esp. those who may seem blameworthy (eg, parents) who may distort understanding of the decedent
  - interviewers’ failure to recognize dynamic factors in them may lead them to feel completely neutral and detached, leading to “false certainty in the face of…ambiguous data”20

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