

Pseudocide: A Case Report

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ABSTRACT

Pseudocide means faking one's own death. It is usually carried out in order to commit fraud. Some people fake their suicide, leaving a suicide note and then disappearing, moving elsewhere to start a new life. A faked death occurs when an individual leaves evidence to suggest that he or she is dead in order to mislead others. This may be done for a variety of reasons, such as to fraudulently collect insurance money or avoid capture by law enforcement for some other crime. Almost the similar and the true story was observed in one of our cases of autopsy on the charred body of a youth.

Keywords: Pseudocide, Charred, Bike, Suicide note, Burns.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Americans know it as pseudocide (a neologism) which means faking one's own death. It is usually carried out in order to commit fraud (falsely claiming against life insurance policies), to avoid debt, or to avoid legal trouble or escape marital difficulties. The British expression, "doing a Reggie Perrin" refers to pseudocide, after a popular 1970s British comedy series called *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*. The lead character, played by Leonard Rossiter, fakes his own death by drowning, leaving his clothes & personal effects on a bench. However, Reggie soon misses his wife and returns home under the assumed identity of a Martin Wellbourne. His wife is pleased to have him back in any form & plays along with his pretence to be another person.

Psychosemantic fallacy is a term used to describe the situation where a person confuses the self as experienced by the self with the self as experienced by others (Schneidman & Farberow, 1967). Suicide notes are meant to be public. They are written for others to read and sometimes to be published. Instead of being intensely personal documents, many suicide notes should be read as social acts (Etkind, 1997). Some people fake their suicide, leaving a suicide note and then disappearing, moving elsewhere to start a new life. These instances include notes left on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco for which no one saw anyone jump off the bridge. A study of these notes was done and it was found that they differed from those left by suicides. They tended to be longer, gave more realistic reasons for suicide (such as financial and legal problems), had less positive emotion, and made less mention of death and suicide than the genuine notes (Seiden & Tauber, 1970). A faked death occurs when an individual leaves evidence to suggest that he or she is dead in order to mislead others. This may be done for a variety of reasons, such as to fraudulently collect insurance money or avoid capture by law enforcement for some other crime.

2. THE PRESENT CASE

Almost the similar but the true story was observed in one of our cases of autopsy on the charred body of a youth. The story had hit the headlines of the regional dailies and it was aired as breaking news on the local TV channels with the caption 'Innocent youth forced to commit suicide due to humiliation caused by Police'.

3. RECOVERY OF BODY

The next day, completely burnt body of a youth in charred state was brought for autopsy in the department of Forensic Medicine. The said body had been referred from a District Hospital by a panel of doctors with the remarks "it is being an extensively burnt & charred body and thus requires services of an expert of Forensic Medicine Department".

4. BRIEF HISTORY

According to the accompanying relatives (father and uncle) of the deceased and the police, it was the body of a 20 year old boy; a drop out from higher secondary level (12th standard) belonging to a reputed family of the small village, allegedly implicated falsely in a robbery of about one lac rupees. The police was after the culprit for a few days but he could not be traced. In order to bring emotional break down and to force him to surrender, the police adopted the usual method and locked up father and the other family members of the alleged culprit in the Police Station. The very next day, the villagers noticed a burning heap of cow-dung on the outskirts of the village and spotted a motor-bike adjacent to it (Figure 1).

The bike was identified to be of the missing youth and a polythene pack was also found on the handle of this bike which contained one cell phone and a 'suicide note' alleged to be of the youth falsely named in the case of robbery which took place a few days before (Figure 2, 3).

The 'suicide note': -

"I am..... S/o R/o..... I have been falsely implicated in the case of robbery on(date) by my neighbors who have jealousy and rivalry with me. I am sick of them and cannot tolerate neither mine nor my family members' insult (humiliation). Hence, I'm committing suicide as the party whose money was snatched, was refusing for my involvement in the incident but some villagers were forcibly implicating me and hence I am finishing myself and that my mobile phone and "DISCOVERY" Motor-cycle be handed over to my family members".

-Sd-

Autopsy:

In view of the suicide note, search for the body was made and it could be easily recovered from the heap of burnt cow-dung. The body was completely burnt and hardly weighed about 25-30 kilogram burnt flesh showing deep burns



Figure 1
Place of recovery of motor-cycle



Figure 2
The bike



Figure 3
Scene of death



Figure 4
The charred body



Figure 5

Heap of charred remnants along with the bike

all over with irregular heat ruptures and charring of the bones (Figure 4, 5). At autopsy, it was found to be charred body of a male, aged between 20-22 years whereas based on the cherry-red discolouration of the burnt tissues, presence of carbonaceous soot particles in the lumen of larynx and trachea and other characteristic findings of burns, the cause of death was opined to be “ante-mortem burns”. However, the viscera were submitted for chemical analysis as the stomach was almost full of watery contents emitting characteristic smell with the congested mucosa.

Further Story:

After knowing the cause of death, the local dailies and media again highlighted the case as ‘humiliation by police forced the innocent youth to commit suicide’. Every one took it to be a case of suicidal burning by an innocent young boy out of social stigmata who could not tolerate the humiliation and disrespect to his noble and reputed family. The villagers believed that the boy was falsely implicated in the case of robbery. After a few days of the incidence, another robbery took place in the area and the offenders were arrested by the Police. Everybody was astonished to know that the ‘master of the gang of offenders’ of this robbery was the youth stated to have committed suicide a few days ago. Now the breaking news in the media was “Dead in record, found alive”. In this way, it proved to be a case of PSEUDOCIDE where the culprit had faked his own death and lived under an assumed name in a town about 50 km from his native village. Then important question before the Police was- whose body was implanted in place of the pseudocide (the youth) who was really involved in the robbery? The ‘gang-master’ confessed before the police that he was involved in the earlier robbery and all the money was given to his father and his maternal uncle who were his accomplice in the robbery and that committing pseudocide or “doing a Reggie Perrin” was his own brain-child which was highly appreciated and well supported by his father and uncle.

5. CONFESSION

The offenders knew a 21 years old labourer from other State who had fallen prey to them due to being habitual of drinking after working in the fields. On the fateful evening, the trio offered him whiskey as a reward for his labour (he had done a few days back in their fields). The poor fellow happily agreed to their offer taking it to be reward for an

obedient servant. They made him drink almost a full bottle of whiskey and when he became intoxicated (dead drunk), they tied his hands and feet and threw him inside a heap of cow-dung and set it to fire at midnight. The accused persons also kept their own motor-bike just a few steps away from it and on its handle they placed a polythene pack containing a suicide note and cell-phone of the culprit in order to make it to be a case of suicide by an innocent youth due to humiliation by false charge of robbery. In this way, the accused succeeded in their attempts. As the trio had thought and planned:

An almost completely burnt heap of cow-dung and adjacent to it a motor-bike were spotted by the villagers in the wee hours. From the polythene pack on the handle of bike a cell phone and a suicide note were recovered. All this led to recovery of the charred body taken to be that of the boy allegedly falsely implicated in the robbery. The prime accused of the case of this murder acted as PSEUDOCIDE by his styles including scalp hairs, beard and moustaches. He kept French-cut style of the beard and started living in a town about 50 km from his village under an assumed name. After some time, another robbery took place in the area and Police followed the accused persons in the robbery.

Ultimately, the prime accused 'pseudocide' was arrested by the police in this case of robbery and in this way the identity of the youth faking his own death could be established. The "pseudocide" spent some time in jail and jumped over the bail. He re-started his previous activities in full swing and could not be arrested by the Police. However, as the luck would have been it, he was ultimately killed during a subsequent encounter with police in yet another case of robbery, proving its "ultimate fate as expected".

6. DISCUSSION

Since the circumstances leading to suicide are subject to a wide variation, it is plausible to assume that suicide notes may be determined by the desire to present the self in a particular way. Suicide notes can be classified into four types: (1) the person has a terminal illness, (2) the person accuses another of causing his or her death, (3) last will and testaments, and (4) first form notes (Jacobs, 1967). Suicides, expecting their suicide notes to appear in the newspapers, saw that they had access to a mass audience, and the suicides could craft their suicide note so as to achieve sympathy or revenge, or perhaps to project an image that others would remember (MacDonald & Murphy, 1990). Joiner's theory of suicide proposes that perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness are the two most important causal factors for suicide.

7. CONCLUSION

The case concludes "Pseudocides try to escape their existence; the rest of us buckle down and deal with things ... But to try to escape entirely what makes you yourself is surely doomed by definition. It's like Baron Münchhausen, lifting himself out of a swamp by his own hair. (He succeeded, but only in fiction.) Or like the pseudocidal efforts of Canoe Man. And look how that worked out ..." ('Macmillan English Dictionary').

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