

## **Crime Scene Staging: An Exploratory Study of the Frequency and Characteristics of Sexual Posing in Homicides**

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### **Abstract**

Crime scene staging and sexual posing and/or positioning of a body in a crime scene are recognized homicide investigation phenomena. Even though staging and sexual posing might misdirect an investigation if unrecognized, there are no reliable data on the frequency of occurrences. The results of a survey administered to 46 trained homicide investigators indicated that while staging may be frequently observed at crime scenes, sexual posing occurs infrequently. Of an estimated 44,541 homicide investigations, respondents indicated that sexual posing was present in less than 1% of the cases ( $n = 428$ ). Results also indicated that most often sexual posing, in contrast to crime scene staging, was typically not carried out to mislead, but the offenders' motivation was more often based on a psychological need for sexual fantasizing or to satisfy anger at the victim. Homicide case examples are presented and discussed to elaborate on the characteristics of sexually-posed crime scenes.

**Keywords:** homicide investigation, sexual posing, crime scene staging, signature, criminal motivations, forensic science.

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The scene of a homicide is the most important criminal event that comes to the attention of police and other forensic investigators. A careful and intelligently guided examination of the crime scene and of the forensically analyzable evidence found there, give direction to and often determine the success or failure of the investigation. It is clear, however, that there are some crime scenes that are difficult to evaluate, requiring very experienced and skillful interpretation. Especially prominent in these difficult instances are those homicides in which the victim's body and perhaps other elements of the scene including the body have been deliberately manipulated. Such "staging" of a scene is often done purposely by a perpetrator in order to mislead the police or to redirect the investigation in such a way that, for instance, a homicide appears to be a suicide. Staging, thus, is a conscious action of an offender, an attempt at a countermeasure; it does not refer to efforts taken by a surviving family member or other loved ones to cover or dress a victim in order to avoid embarrassment.

### **Staged Homicide Scenes**

Staged homicide scenes are intriguing crimes, often highly publicized in the popular media. This is particularly true when the staging involves sexual posing, the presentation of the victim's body in a sexually provocative or sexually enhanced way. A well-known example of this is the case which inspired dozens of books, internet-sites, a video game, an Australian swing band and, eventually a popular Hollywood movie entitled *The Black Dahlia* (De Palma, 2006). In this case the killer posed the victim's body so that each of her arms was raised over her head at a 45-degree angle, the lower half of her severed body was positioned a foot over from her torso and her legs were positioned straight out, spread wide open, in a sexual way. The search for the killer in this crime spawned generations of armchair detectives. That fact reveals not only that there is great interest in such cases but also the possibility that such staged crime scenes, if not recognized for what they are, might be difficult to solve. It is obviously important that those who investigate homicides be aware of the characteristics of staging and the motivations of those who engage in such activity. Whether such crimes are frequent or infrequent, it can easily be seen that they are still serious events deserving of carefully conducted investigatory efforts.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

Little is known about the frequency of staged homicides, nor is there adequate information regarding the motivation of offenders who stage such crimes. These are important issues. Offenders who are successful in evading detection by staging a crime scene might find greater encouragement for continued offending. And, of course, those who may stage a scene for purposes other than avoiding detection, such as for inner psychological needs, might inadvertently complicate or frustrate an investigation even though their intention is not necessarily to do so. How frequent these motivations are seen in staged or other homicides, or how often staging actually occurs, are not typically recorded in justice system data. Those

statistics can only be drawn from those who have access to such detailed information about homicides, the investigators themselves.

Keppel & Weis (2004), state that the act of leaving a victim's body in an unusual position is a conscious criminal action by an offender to thwart an investigation, shock the finder and investigators, or give perverted pleasure to the killer. The author generally agrees with the definition used. However, Keppel and Weis (2004), attempt to differentiate posing from staging by stating that posing is not to be confused with staging because staging refers to manipulation of the scene around the body as well as positioning of the body to make the scene appear to be something it is not. However, there is a difference of opinion in the literature on this latter point. Geberth (2006) considers sexual posing as a subset of staging and any change in the crime scene, which includes the manipulation of a victim's body is in fact staging. This viewpoint will be further illustrated in this article.

Regardless of how IT is defined, sexual posing of a body in a crime scene is a rarity. Keppel and Weis (1990) reported that in a search of the Homicide Investigation Tracking System (HITS) there were 2,115 murders in the database but only six cases of posing. However, their study was limited to cases that occurred within the State of Washington and surrounding area. Therefore, there is a need for further evaluation and review of cases involving posing and staging.

Another study in which staging was explored was reported by Hazelwood and Napier (2004). In their study, twenty investigators, both active and retired, all of whom were known to the authors, were telephonically surveyed about their knowledge of staged crimes. These investigators had an average of 28 years of law enforcement experience and collectively had either investigated or consulted on 33,630 violent crimes, averaging 1,682 each (Hazelwood & Napier, 2004). The study reported 903 staged crimes, 411 dealing with death scenes and 492 involving nonfatal, false allegations of sexual assault. Hazelwood and Napier (2004) found that in those cases, staging was seen in less than 3% (903 out of 33,630) of all crimes and about 1% of those involving death.

Hazelwood and Napier (2004) also discussed apparent motivations for staging. These were either self-preservation (re-direction of the investigation away from the offender by trying to alter the manner of death, the cause of death or the motive for the original act) or embarrassment-shame (providing the victim with a sense of dignity). According to Hazelwood and Napier (2004), offenders who staged crimes engaged in either one or both of these behaviors.

While the Hazelwood and Napier (2004) data are of interest, the study did not examine homicides exclusively, but also focused on non-fatal and alleged sexual assaults. Their study involved a survey of only 20 respondents. Moreover, the focus was on the broad notion of staging and did not consider the specific form of staging in which there is sexual posing of a body. There are differing opinions of the literature on how crime scene staging should be defined.

## **Crime Scene Staging Definitions**

A number of authors have defined staging as the purposeful alteration of a crime scene in an attempt to mislead investigators and to frustrate the criminal justice process (Douglas & Munn, 1992; Geberth, 1990, 1996, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007; Hazelwood & Napier, 2004; Keppel & Weis, 2004; Keppel & Birnes, 2009). Generally, there seems to be agreement that the term 'staging' should not be used to describe the actions of surviving family members who cover or re-dress a loved one who is found nude or has died in an embarrassing situation. Such activities are certainly understandable considering the shock experienced by a relative who encounters the sudden and violent death of a loved one (Geberth, 1996).

However, there are some authors who feel that the definition of staging should include activities done to cover for embarrassment. The word embarrassment, it is argued, refers to too wide a variety of circumstances (Hazelwood & Napier, 2004). However, as long as there is no conscious attempt to mislead the authorities, there does not appear to be any disagreement among experts on the use of the term staging. It is understood that in death investigations surviving family members and loved ones experience extreme emotional upset. Such persons may unintentionally do things in the crime scene out of shock or confusion. This is why it is important in the initial interviews that investigators learn from the survivors exactly what transpired and what action were carried out prior to the arrival of the police (Geberth, 2006).

## **Types of Crime Scene Staging**

There are several types of crime scene staging that have been discussed in the literature. The first of these occurs when the perpetrator changes elements of the scene to make a homicide appear to be either a suicide or an accident in order to cover up what is actually a murder (Geberth, 2006). The second type of staging is when the perpetrator attempts to redirect an investigation by making a crime appear to be a sex-related homicide. Arson may represent another type of staging. Here, the offender purposely sets fire to a crime scene to destroy evidence or make a death appear to be the result of an accident (Geberth, 2006). If the purpose was simply to destroy evidence there are some who believe that this would not represent a staged crime scene. In such a case the arson would simply be a continuation of the crime via the destruction of evidence by fire (Hazelwood & Napier, 2004). However, it is clear that the arson by itself does destroy evidence and it is oftentimes employed by an offender to cover up a murder or to attempt to make the fire appear to be accidental. In other words the arson is carried out deliberately to thwart the police investigation and to destroy evidence. The two actions go hand-in-hand and, from an investigator's point of view, the two cannot be separated.

## **Sexual Posing**

Sexual posing is a specific type of staging. Definitions for and examples of sexual posing and/or positioning of a victim's body at the crime scene may be found in both clinical and criminal justice literature. (Hazelwood & Napier, 2004; Geberth, 2003, 2006; Keppel & Weis, 2004; Keppel & Birnes, 2009). For this paper, the following definition of sexual posing will be

employed: Sexual posing is the deliberate act of sexually positioning a body in the crime scene. This includes presenting a totally nude or partially clothed victim's body for display, which has been manipulated in a sexual manner to expose the breasts, buttocks and/or genitalia. In addition, spreading open the victim's legs, splaying out of the victim's arms, presenting the victim in bondage and/or binding the hands behind the back, hanging the nude or semi-nude body, insertion of foreign objects into the sexual orifices, engaging in sexual mutilation, piquerism, cutting, evisceration, defeminization, and/or overkill injuries are all seen to be a part of sexual posing or staging.

### **Official Statistics on the Prevalence of Sexual Posing in Homicides**

In addition to the limited information gathered from the above literature, the author queried the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Morbidity Studies, the Regional Organized Crime Information Center (ROCIC), Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (VICAP), the Federal Bureau of Investigation Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) and the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) to determine if there were any statistics available on the total number of staged homicides. Official statistics on homicide staging were not available from these agencies. Similarly, there were no official statistics regarding the sexual posing of a body at crime scenes. This type of information is generally not collected or documented by law enforcement agencies unless the agency has established a VICAP system of crime scene analysis similar to the FBI.

### **Purpose of This Study**

This study was undertaken to add to the body of literature on staged homicide scenes. The author had access to 109 cases of sexual posing in his personal files. These consultative cases included full documentation of the crime investigation; crime scene photographs, the offender's statements and confession, investigative reports, and other reports, such as forensic analysis, were typically available. The information also included the race and age of the victim and offender, the type of sex-related activity (e.g. rape, sodomy, etc.), the state in which the homicide occurred, the modality of death (e.g., strangulation, stabbing, etc.), the presentation of the body at the scene (e.g., nude, leg and arm position, etc), and the offender's expressed motivation for the sexual posing or positioning of the victim's body.

While the reporting of statistics on staged homicide scenes is inherently useful, there is reason to believe that such events may be increasing in number, making better information about this phenomenon all the more important.

According to Geberth (2006), as the public learns more about the process of and the shortcomings in death investigation from the popular media, crime-related books, television programs and Hollywood movies, there is the likelihood that staging as well as sexual posing will be more commonly attempted. And, because of such media attention, there seems to be a general perception, even among law enforcement officers, that staging, especially sexual posing in the killing of a female, is quite prevalent. This research will explore how common staging, specifically sexual posing, is in homicides. The offender's motivation to engage in posing will

also be explored. The results from this exploratory study will be helpful to all homicide investigations.

## **Methods**

In order to add to the author's personal files of the 109 homicide cases which involved sexual posing, additional data were collected from a non-probability, purposive sampling of both active and retired law enforcement investigators who were known to have extensive experience in homicide investigations. These investigators were employed in various city, county and state police departments. They were selected based on their experience in death investigations; this ranged from 15 up to 40 years with an average of 25. The author also took into consideration geographical location so as to be sure that the Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western regions of the United States were represented. Most of the investigators were personally known to the author because of participation in training seminars and/or involvement in professional associations as well as mutual engagement in homicide consultations over the years. Many were nationally renowned homicide investigation consultants who regularly provide expert testimony and advanced training in their particular field of expertise. Each respondent had been at some point in his investigative career either in command of a homicide division or had served as a full-time homicide investigators.

In a limited number of instances (two) respondents were not known to the author. In these situations a recommendation was sought from a person or persons familiar to the author and who worked in an agency in a large city outside of the author's experience. In all, a sample of 46 highly-experienced homicide investigators was identified. Each of them was contacted and advised of the purpose of the study.

## **Sample Selection**

Out of the 46 investigators contacted, 43 agreed to participate in the survey, a 93% response rate. The remaining three responses were received, but after the deadline for analysis and were not included in the findings. The respondents in the purposive sample were selected so that the responses were representative of major city, county and state law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. The following agencies were represented: Alaska State Troopers, Arizona Department of Public Safety, Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), Pennsylvania State Police, Michigan State Police, New York State Police, Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation, Washington State Homicide Investigation Tracking System (HITS), Harris County Sheriff's Office, Texas, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Florida, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, Multnomah County, Oregon, Akron, Ohio, Chicago, Illinois, Huntington Beach, California, Indianapolis, Indiana, Las Vegas Metro, Nevada, Miami, Florida, Longmont, Colorado, New York City Police Department, New Orleans, Louisiana, Oklahoma City Police, Oklahoma, Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, Pennsylvania, Sacramento, California, Seminole County, Florida Sheriff's Office, St. Louis, Missouri, St. Paul, Minnesota, Rochester Police Department, New York, Office, Tulsa, Oklahoma, Warwick, Rhode Island, Wichita, Kansas, and Yonkers Police Department, New York.

Prior to the data collection, all 46 respondents were contacted by phone and informed about the nature of the research. Surveys were then distributed electronically via email. The survey contained a structured series of questions asking for descriptive information regarding the respondent's name, agency affiliation and location, and years of investigative experience. Specific open-ended questions relevant to the respondents' exposure to crime scene elements that were the focus of this research were included in the instrument.

### **Operationalization of Sexual Posing**

According to Geberth (2009), any change in the crime scene, which includes the manipulation of a victim's body is in fact staging. From that point of view then, "posing" the victim's body is a component of "staging." According to Geberth (In Press), there are three specific motives why an offender would intentionally pose or position the victim's body in a sexual manner in a crime scene:

1. Offenders pose a body sexually to satisfy a perverse sexual fantasy. Sexual sadists rely heavily on fantasy and ritual to obtain sexual satisfaction. The sexual manipulation of the victim's body including posing, propping, sexual mutilation, defeminization and evisceration are the most common motivation.
2. Offenders pose out of an anger/retaliation motive. The offender uses sex as a weapon to punish and degrade the woman. The posing of the body is done to further degrade the victim out of anger or revenge. This is the second most common motivation in sexual manipulation of the body
3. Offenders sexually pose a body to "Stage-the-Scene" to make it appear to be a sex-related murder. The offender is consciously attempting to mislead and thwart the police investigation by making the murder appear to be sexual when in reality the murder was based on interpersonal violence.

Sexual posing was operationalized as

***"the deliberate act of sexually positioning the body in the crime scene. This includes presenting a totally nude or partially clothed victim's body for display, which has been manipulated in a sexual manner to expose the breasts, buttocks and/or genitalia. In addition, spreading open the victim's legs, splaying out of the victim's arms, presenting the victim in bondage and/or binding the hands behind the back, hanging the nude or semi-nude body, insertion of foreign objects into the sexual orifices, engaging in sexual mutilation, piquerism, cutting, evisceration, defeminization, and/or overkill injuries"*** (Geberth,1996, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010)

## Resulting Data

Respondents were given two months to check any personal records that were available. Following that, they were asked to return the completed questionnaire to the author. Once received, the survey instruments were reviewed and any clarification or elaboration needed was obtained through a personal interview of the respondents by telephone. The author also followed up in each case with a telephone call to assure that all respondents had properly understood sexual posing as it was defined for them and that they were clear regarding the three specific motives as to why an offender would intentionally pose or position a victim's body in a sexual manner in a scene.

As a result of the follow-up interview process, an additional 76 cases were identified by the respondents, bringing the sample size of known homicides to 185 cases each of which could be classified on the basis of one of the three motivations for sexual posing of a victim's body.

## Limitations

It is understood and important to note that the homicides represented in the sample were neither a random sample of murder cases involving sexual posing nor necessarily an otherwise representative sample of all murders involving sexual posing occurring in the United States. Data was collected based on voluntary reporting of cases from each law enforcement jurisdiction contacted. In addition, it was understood that detailed records of the cases or consultations that these respondents participated in might not have been available, or if available, may not have been consulted. For that reason, the respondents were only asked to approximate the number of homicide investigations in which they had been involved and the number which involved sexual posing. Because of the limited resources available for this exploratory study, inter-rater reliability measures were not employed at this stage of the research. In addition, because this exploratory study focused on sexual posing, it is possible that respondents relied on their own understanding of sexual posing, rather than on the definition given to them. Although, as already stated, a concerted effort was made to ensure that this did not occur, that action may have only minimized, not eliminated, the problem.

## Results

The respondents had a total of 1,114 cumulative years of experience in death investigation, averaging 25 years per investigator. The respondents collectively estimated that they had investigated, supervised or consulted on 44,541 homicide investigations, averaging 1,035 homicides per investigator. On average, each investigator had been involved with ten sexually-posed homicides in his or her career. It was estimated that there were 428 cases of sexual posing within the total number of homicides (< 1%) examined in their careers. The data in this report indicate that the most common modality of death was through both manual and ligature strangulation and was used in 71% of the sexually posed events ( $N = 185$ ). Of the cases provided by respondents, only 76 cases provided sufficient detailed information for further descriptive analysis.



In any investigation, and especially in a homicide investigation, the determination of the offender’s motive is extremely important. A detailed examination of motivation in sexually-posed homicides was possible in 76 of the cases provided by the survey respondents. In addition to those cases, the author had access to another 109 such cases in his personal files which were included in the dataset. In each of the 185 cases, full documentation, such as crime scene photographs, the offender’s statements and confession, investigative reports, and other such reports, was available. The reports included: the race and age of the victim and offender; the type of sex-related activity (e.g. rape, sodomy, etc.); the state in which the homicide occurred; the modality of death (e.g., strangulation, stabbing, etc.); the presentation of the body at the scene (e.g., nude, leg and arm position, etc); and, the offender’s expressed motivation for the sexual posing or positioning of the victim’s body.

**Table 1:  
Characteristics of Staged-Crime  
Victims and Crime Features**

Characteristic	N	%
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	181	98
Male	4	2
<b>Race</b>		
White	127	69
Non-white	58	31
<b>Type of Offense</b>		
Serial murder	81	44
Rape/sodomy	58	31
Lust	24	13
Interpersonal	22	12
<b>Motivation for posing</b>		
Fantasy	131	71
Anger/retaliation	40	22
Misdirect Invest.	14	7
<b>Body presentation</b>		
Nude	127	69
Partial nude	58	31

The characteristics of the 185 cases, including the victim’s race and sex and the features of the crimes themselves are summarized in Table 1. An examination of these case files revealed that offender’s motivations could be sorted into three categories, sexual fantasy, anger/retaliation and the “staging” of the scene to misdirect the investigation (See Table 1). This table illustrates that the majority of the victims were White females. In addition, most of the cases which involved sexual posing (44%) occurred in cases involving serial murders (Two or more).

Of the 185 cases, 131 (71%) indicated that it was the offender’s sexual fantasy which motivated him to stage the crime scene (Table 1). These offenders did this staging in order to obtain sexual satisfaction by propping the body in a certain way, by mutilation of body parts, be defeminization (e.g., removal of breasts), and by evisceration.

In 40 (22%) of the cases the offender was motivated to stage the scene, that is, pose the victim’s body, out of anger/retaliation. This staging was a deliberate effort to further degrade the victim. Typically the posing consisted of spreading open the victim’s legs to expose the genitalia, insertion of objects into sexual orifices, propping up of the buttocks or exposing the breasts to further degrade the victim.

Finally, staging was rare, in only 14 (7%) instances did the offender stage the crime scene in a deliberate effort to make a homicide appear to be sex-related when it was not. In these cases the offender actually committed the homicide while engaged in violent, but non-sexual, activity. The posing was essentially an after-thought; a countermeasure intended to mislead the investigative effort (Geberth, 2003; Keppel & Birnes, 2009).

The mode of death in relation to the offenders’ known motivation was also examined. Those results are shown in Table 2. In these cases, across all categories of offenders’ motivation, the most frequent mode of death was strangulation followed by stabbing. Other modes were relatively infrequent.

**Table 2:  
Motivation of Offender and Mode of Killing**

Mode of killing	Fantasy (N= 131)	Anger/Retaliation N=40	Misdirect Investigation* N=14
Strangulation	91 (69%)	26 (65%)	8 (57%)
Stabbing	26 (20%)	9 (22%)	3 (21%)
Blunt Trauma	9 ( 7%)	3 ( 8%)	1 ( 7%)
All other	5 ( 4%)	2 ( 5%)	2 (14%)

\*Percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

## Case Study Examples

In order to elaborate on the characteristics of sexual posing investigations, the most relevant details of representative cases are presented here.

### *Case 1*

The first victim in this investigation was a 27-year-old, white female, whose nude body had been discovered in the parking lot of a restaurant. The body had been positioned so that the victim was lying on her back, face up, thereby exposing her breasts and genitalia. Her ankles were crossed and her face was partially covered with a lid from a plastic cup, which covered blunt-force injuries to her head. There was also evidence that her necklace had been used as a ligature along with scratch marks on the side of her neck. In addition, there were postmortem marks on the high points of her body, indicating that she had been dragged. The assailant had posed the victim's body with her hands crossed on her chest and a Douglas fir cone beneath her fingers. The victim had been posed as if laying in a coffin, hence the fir cone (Did the Douglas fir cone connote a pine box or coffin?) This would later prove extremely interesting because the killer was actually looking for another woman whose last name was "Coffin."

The police recovered foreign pubic hairs on and near the victim's body. The medical examination revealed that she had been vaginally raped and sodomized with an unknown object. Her clothing was missing along with all identification. As a result, her identity remained unknown until four days later when she was identified as a "missing person" from Redmond, Washington. She had last been seen in the early morning hours of June 20th at a popular bar and restaurant. Her car was later located in the parking lot of the establishment, where her pocketbook was discovered in the restaurant's lost and found.<sup>2</sup>

The second victim's nude body had been displayed on the bed with a pillow over her head. The barrel of a shotgun had been inserted into the victim's vagina. The body was totally nude except for a pair of red high heel shoes, which had been placed upon her feet by the offender. The body had been posed and positioned so that whoever walked into the room would be confronted with the woman's nude body face-up exposing her breasts and genitalia. There was evidence of blunt-force trauma to the head and manual strangulation. Although there wasn't any evidence of vaginal rape or sodomy, there were foreign pubic hairs found on the mattress and the rug in the victim's bedroom. Two expensive rings were missing from the hands of the victim.

Both of these crimes occurred within 47 days of each other and there were certainly similar circumstances of posing and propping of both bodies at the crime scene. However, in the second case the police had good reason to suspect a former boyfriend, who made an excellent suspect due to his activities prior to the murder. In addition, when the police attempted to question him, he hired an attorney, who refused to even discuss the case with the authorities. From an investigative perspective it was logical not to link these cases at this time. Furthermore,

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<sup>2</sup> Personal Interview and communications with Detective Marvin Skeen, May 15, 1991 and April 20, 1993. Follow-up interview Chief Criminal Investigator Marvin Skeen May, 2005 and February, 2009.

the classification of the pubic hair from the first case as well as the present case would not be determined by the FBI lab until September. In fact, had the local state lab conducted the basic hair classification both of these cases could have been linked, despite the antics of the former boyfriend, who was Caucasian.<sup>3</sup>

The next case took place within the same county twenty-four days after the last murder. The body of a 24-year-old, white, female victim was discovered in her bedroom. Her nude body had been positioned under the bed covers with a pillow covering her face. There was a vibrator placed in the victim's mouth and next to her head was a book entitled *More of the Joys of Sex*. There was also evidence of blunt-force trauma to the victim's head consistent with over-kill. When the police removed the bed covers, they saw that the body had been posed spread-eagled on her back, with a series of postmortem slashing and stabbings. The victim's body was posed face-up thereby exposing her breasts and genitalia. The cause of death was blunt-force trauma to her head. However, the offender felt the need to inflict over 241 postmortem stab wounds throughout the victim's body. There were frontal wounds into the side of the victim's neck, into her chest, breasts, abdomen, and upper thighs. There was a series of dorsal wounds in the back and buttocks, and along both legs. Even the bottom of the victim's feet bore evidence of this piquerism. An expensive ring was missing from the victim's finger. Once again as in the previous two cases crime scene technicians recovered a foreign pubic hair, which was adherent to one of her stab wounds. It was apparent that the offender spent a considerable amount of time at the crime scene. The infliction of all of these postmortem wounds throughout the body took a considerable amount of time. This serial murder case was a classic example of fantasy driven behavior in connection with the first two victims. However, the third victim was targeted out of revenge and anger. According to the original police investigation the third victim met the offender for the first time in July of 1991 when mutual friends were assisting her with a vehicle. Later the offender stopped by her residence unannounced. The victim who was upset by this event told the offender not to bother her. She also asked their mutual friends to inform the offender that she was not interested in dating him and didn't want him coming to her residence. The police investigation revealed that this victim complained to her landlord that someone had broken in to her apartment after this incident. The offender, who had previously lived in the same area as the victim and was known to commit burglaries, and was reportedly angry at her for putting him down.<sup>4</sup> In this investigation several aspects of what is referred to as a crime "signature" were also evident. The signature aspect of a violent criminal offender is a unique and integral part of the offender's behavior. This signature component refers to the psychodynamics, which are the mental and emotional processes underlying human behavior and its motivations (Geberth, 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> Personal Interview and communications Detective Dale Foote, April 26, 1991 and April 20, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview and communication with Detective Larry Peterson, King County, Washington, November 4, 1991 and April 26, 1994. Also Chief Criminal Investigator, Marvin Skeen, February 2009.

Each murder in this investigation was sexually motivated. Each of the victims was discovered totally nude. Each victim's body had been positioned face-up to expose the breasts and genitalia. Each victim had been posed and/or positioned after death with props and/or objects inserted nearby or placed on their bodies. However, the last case represented a classic anger retaliatory motivation on the part of the offender towards this victim.

It was apparent that the killer spent a considerable amount of time with each of the victims and engaged in activities which went well beyond those necessary to kill the victims. In fact, there was a classic progression of violence inflicted on each new victim. Each of the bodies had been posed for "shock value." However, it is also apparent that the offender was satisfying a personal need and he apparently got a sexual thrill in the manipulation and posing of his victim's bodies. In the third case he also acted out his revenge at the victim through the overkill injuries he inflicted and the manipulation of her body. He placed the vibrator in her mouth to degrade the victim to satisfy his anger at her refusal to date him.

One investigative strategy which proved important in this case was the necessity to conduct the essential forensic examinations to establish and ascertain the facts of the case. In each of these homicides, foreign hairs were recovered on or near the victims. In each of the homicides the authorities had attempted to submit the hair evidence to their state crime laboratory. However, the laboratory refused to accept the hairs without a comparison sample. This was a major forensic error, which impacted the investigation. Had the laboratory provided only the general classification of Caucasoid, Negroid or Mongoloid the authorities would have been aware that case #1 and case# 2 were possibly related for no other reason than the presence of Negroid hairs. Instead, the two investigations went separate ways until an alert detective discovered a link between the suspect and the homicides.

## Case 2

A mother and her daughter were murdered and mutilated inside their residence. The mother suffered several stab wounds into the upper portion of her body. She was found lying in a supine position on a couch in the family room. She was naked except for a nightgown, which the killer pulled back to expose the body and there was evidence that the killer had undressed her as well. The offender had also removed her panties and a tampon. The victim had also been eviscerated from the vaginal area to mid chest, which exposed some internal organs. The victim's vaginal area including pubis had been excised from the body and placed into her mouth. The killer had posed the body on the couch with her legs spread and her arms by her side. Both of the victim's breasts had been excised from her chest and taken into another room to be placed near to where the daughter's body had been displayed. The daughter's body was in the mother's bed in a supine position. She was totally nude and there was evidence that the killer had undressed her. She had been eviscerated from near the vaginal area to her chest. The skin surrounding the vaginal area had been excised from her body and placed on the right side of her face. In addition, there were numerous stab wounds into the anterior portion of her neck. Her legs had been spread and her arms were near her side. A baseball bat had been jammed into her vaginal cavity. The mother's breasts had been placed on a dresser and headboard beside the daughter's body. When the killer was apprehended authorities learned that his sexual fantasies included sexual assault, evisceration and sexual mutilation of young girls. He wanted to cut off

his victim's breasts and vagina and shove beer bottles and other instruments into their sexual orifices. Clearly, he was experiencing sexual gratification as he engaged in these sadistic murders. This was a classic example of fantasy driven behavior by the offender in the crime scene.

One of the investigative strategies employed during this investigation were the immediate review of all police incident reports for the previous 24 hours. As a result early on in the investigation, police had a lead on a possible suspect, who was observed in the early morning hours acting in a suspicious manner. A uniform officer had stopped the man who was loitering near a VFW facility. The officer, who thought that the man was a possible Burglar, did a routine "Stop and Frisk" and determined that no crime had been committed. When investigators went to the location where the officer stopped the man they found one of the kitchen knives used to mutilate the victims in a garbage can at the VFW hall. Surveillance was initiated on the subject and his residence. He was observed placing a paper bag into garbage outside his residence. An investigator posing as a garbage man collected the garbage and separated the suspect's garbage from the other trash. Inside the bag was a blood-soaked ski mask, which would later be matched to the victims. Another investigative strategy was the immediate request for the State Crime Lab for assistance. It is basic principle to recognize that a case may require the expertise of a larger more experience agency to assure that the local police have the logistical and technical support to conduct the investigation.

The third investigative strategy is one that the author recommends. In certain cases the medical examiner/coroner should be requested to allow the body to remain at the scene during the crime scene process in order to recover crucial microscopic evidence that would have been lost in the removal or transport of the body. These specific types of cases are usually sex-related homicides. Homicides in which the offender stabs, cuts, pierces or mutilates the sexual regions or organs of the victim's body. Cases involving evisceration, piquerism, displacement of the genitalia in both males and females, and the removal of the breasts in a female victim and include the posing or propping of the victim's body, insertion of objects into body cavities and sexual mutilation. These events are predicated on the obsessive fantasies of the offender. It is not enough for these type killers just to kill; they have a compulsive need to act out their fantasies with their victims and their victim's bodies. Thus, their personal interactions with the body many times result in the transference of microscopic evidence. If the body is moved or transported valuable evidence can easily be lost, contaminated or destroyed in the process. This event took place in a rural area that was quite cold. The Chief Investigator who conferred with the medical examiner decided to follow this recommended procedure. The heat to the home was turned off to maintain the cold. In this case the bodies were left in place for two and ½ days as the crime scene and bodies were processed. This resulted in the recovery of valuable microscopic evidence, which was eventually linked to the suspect. (Geberth, 2006)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Personal interview and communication with Chief Criminal Investigator Robin Wagg, Douglas County, WA Recently in February, 2010 and previously on August 15-16, 1995, May, 2002 and July 20, 2005.

### Case 3

In this case a male reported that he had been attacked by a man with a knife and the man had also had killed his wife. The police had been led into the house by the man, who showed them his wife's body in the basement. He indicated that he had also been injured and showed the officers some superficial cuts and puncture wounds on his body. The man was transferred to the Emergency Room of the local hospital for treatment. The crime scene extended from outside the house to the basement. The female victim, who had received multiple stab wounds, was found lying on her back. Her pants had been ripped open and her panties had been pulled down to reveal her pubic area. Her sanitary napkin was pulled away and between her legs the crime scene officers retrieved an unused condom. The male had stated that he had surprised the intruder when he had come home from jogging. The male showed the officers evidence of a "burglary." The burglary consisted of items being tossed on the floor and perfume bottles being turned over on the dresser in the master bedroom. However, there was not anything missing. Although the presentation of the female body in the crime scene suggested a sexual attack, the circumstances of the event as well as the inconsistent statements of the husband indicated this murder to be based on an interpersonal dispute and an assault. The police investigation indicated that the crime had been staged to suggest a burglary and a sexual assault. The investigative strategy was to allow the husband to give his extensive alibi in order to lock him into his own scenario, which would prove to be his undoing. The reconstruction of the event focusing on the blood evidence at the scene indicated the attack had initiated outside of the house and continued inside. The deceased had apparently been taken by surprise as she was working outside.

She received stab wounds to the top of her head and face. The blood evidence also indicated that she had attempted to flee into the house to escape. Detectives used Luminal throughout the crime scene and located a number of areas indicating that there had been blood present or someone had "cleaned-up" blood. Blood evidence was collected from the bathroom, office, master bedroom, stairwell and basement. The majority of blood found in upstairs areas belonged to the husband. The majority of blood found in the basement belonged to the victim. The husband had attempted to make the crime appear to be a sexual assault by ripping open her pants and placing a condom between her legs. However, when he ripped her panties, he left a drop of his own blood from his cut finger on her leg. The husband was charged with his wife's murder based on the blood evidence and DNA testing. This was a classic staged crime scene with sexual posing intended to mislead the investigation, to make the killing by the husband appear to be a burglary and a sex crime committed by an unknown offender.<sup>6</sup>

### Investigative Strategies and Discussion

Although crime scene staging, and in particular sexual posing, is not frequently encountered in homicides, when it does occur it may mislead the investigation. These data and the case examples reveal a number of points that investigators might attend to when attempting to determine if sexual posing is present, and when suspected, what investigative strategies might be most fruitful. In any sex-related homicide, including rape-murders, serial murders, killings,

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<sup>6</sup> Personal Interview Detective Jonathon Cox, Larimer County, CO November 22, 2002.

which involve anal and oral sodomy and other acts of sexual perversion, as well as interpersonal violence scenarios, it must be kept in mind that no one acts without motivation. The challenge is for the investigator to discover the motive and then apply this information to the investigation.

A careful search should always be conducted at the crime scene and within the surrounding area for evidence of sexual activity. This includes the presence of sexual assault activity as well as substitute and paraphiliac behaviors. This evidence may be seminal fluid in the vagina, mouth, nasal area, or rectum. Or, there may be semen and other evidence discovered outside the body or upon the clothing. There may be pornographic books, videos, magazines, and/or photographs found at the crime scene. The photographs may depict the victim involved in sexual activity. Or, there may be writings or messages left by the offender at the crime scene and/or upon the body of the deceased. In any event, these factors are important in determining what type of sexual activity likely took place.

The motivation for the crime is an extremely important consideration in establishing the investigative direction. “Was the murder the result of a lover’s quarrel? Is the case attributed to interpersonal violence? Does it appear the victim was killed during a rape or sodomy attempt? Is the killing sexually oriented? Is there a psychotic motive, which sometimes appears to be motiveless or bizarre? Or, is the homicide the work of a sexual psychopath, with sadistic or impulsive implications? Each of these scenarios suggests a specific course of action.

However, in sex-related homicide investigations, especially when the scene has been staged, the motivation behind the killing may not be immediately ascertained. That fact is why victimology is so important in the investigative process. “Victimology is the collection and assessment of all significant information related to the victim and his or her lifestyle” (Geberth, 2006, pp. 21-22). Personality, employment, education, friends, habits, hobbies, marital status, relationships, dating history, sexuality, reputation, criminal record, history of alcohol or drugs, physical condition and neighborhood of residence are all pieces of the mosaic that comprise victimology. The best sources of information will be friends, family, associates and neighbors. Those sources will be the initial focus of the investigation.

“There are ten specific investigative strategies to employ during an investigation in order to prevent missing crucial information, which might reveal a staged scene. Each of these must be fully accounted for:

1. Assess the victimology of the deceased.
2. Evaluate the type of injuries and wounds of the victim in connection with the type of weapon employed.
3. Evaluate the type of injuries and wounds of the victim in connection with the type of weapon employed.
4. Conduct an examination of the weapon(s) for latent evidence as well as ballistics and testing of firearms.
5. Evaluate the behavior(s) of the victim and suspects.
6. Establish a profile of the victim through interviews of friends and relatives.
7. Reconstruct and evaluate the event.
8. Compare investigative findings with the medico legal autopsy and confer with the medical examiner.



9. Corroborate statements with evidential facts.
10. Conduct and process all death investigations as if they were homicide cases.” (Geberth, 2006, pp. 29-30)

### **Ideas for Further Research**

Due to the disagreement in the literature on the differences between sexual staging and posing a larger scale study should be conducted with data collected entirely from homicide case files. Ideally, a nationwide study could be undertaken by accessing the data in the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (VICAP) and comparing those data with the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) to determine how frequently sexual posing is seen in all recorded homicides. In addition, an examination of specific cases looking at offender motivations might indicate whether or not the sexual manipulation of a body in a crime scene is in fact a subset of a more general phenomenon of staging. This exploratory study, if expanded to include homicide investigations not just in the U.S. but on a transnational basis, might be revealing of a “global phenomenon.” That is, serial killers, some of whom are involved in sexually motivated homicides, are known today to engage in their crimes without regard for political boundaries. A broader-scale understanding of their behaviors could prove to be of investigative value.

### **Conclusion**

In the author’s experience any change to the original crime, including manipulation of the body in the scene, is in fact a “staging.” Although there are no official statistics maintained on the actual number of staged crime scenes, the observations reported here by 43 highly trained and experienced homicide investigators suggest that one form of staging, sexual posing, is very infrequent, accounting for less than 1% of homicide incidents. The data indicate that sexual posing is a highly personal action on the part of the offender, which oftentimes involves extreme emotion, anger and rage. The most prevalent motive is fantasy driven behavior (71%). In these instances the offender subconsciously acted-out a sexually significant behavioral pattern to obtain sexual satisfaction. The second most frequent motivation was anger/retaliation (22%). In those cases the offender uses sex as a weapon to punish and degrade the victim; the body is posed out of anger, to retaliate against the victim for some real or apparent slight of the offender. It is fortunate that the least often seen offender motivation for sexual posing is to misdirect the investigation, occurring in 7% of the cases. The rarity of such events, of course, does not suggest that they deserve any less attention in the training regimen of investigators.

It is this motive that has captured the attention of the popular media and, more important, it is this motive that is quite insidious. When an offender consciously attempts to mislead and thwart a police investigation, by making a murder resulting from interpersonal violence appear to be a sexual crime for instance, is when investigative training and experience are most critical. When such cases are successfully resolved, it is the collaboration between investigative personnel and others involved in the investigative process that accounts for that outcome. It may be inferred that greater media attention to these offenses and their characteristics may contribute

to a greater probability of their occurrence. Accordingly, continued preparation of investigators for these possibilities is in order.

The high percentage of strangulation (125 out of 185 cases) present in these data is of significant investigative importance. In sex-related homicides strangulation in combination with bondage and other torture is employed to enhance the killer's sexual arousal. The data in this report indicate that the most common modality of death was through both manual and ligature strangulation and was used in 71% of the sexually posed events. Many times murder events can be linked through nothing more than the unique configuration of the ligatures. There is a high frequency of fantasy involved with sexual arousal through strangulation. In some cases an offender may engage in elaborate bondage. The killer often links the restraints used for strangulation to control the amount of pressure on the victim's throat. In this way he is able to manipulate and control the victim's movement to enhance her fear and terror, which satisfies an underlying psychosexual need of the offender. Strangulation also provides a hands-on power over life and death, which makes an offender feel powerful. In fact, it may be this need for power that drives the fantasy of the offender in cases involving sexual posing of the victim's body. Even though this phenomenon is not common it would be of great value to those involved in homicide investigations to develop more complete and thorough data on this topic.

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