

CASE REPORT

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Sexual Asphyxiation: An Unusual Case Involving Four Male Adolescents

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ABSTRACT: A case of sexual asphyxiation is described involving children, adolescent males, homosexuality and two bizarre strangulations.

Two adolescent males (ages 13 & 10) initially engaged in homosexual activity in conjunction with sexual asphyxiation. This unusual activity was by chance observed by one of the boy's younger brother and his friend. The younger children (aged 7 & 8) expressed a desire to join in the activity, which they did by letting ligatures be tied around their necks and engaging in anal intercourse to the point of fatal asphyxiation.

This case is of interest in the reported way the younger boys discovered the practice (a sexually explicit magazine) and is unusual because of the young ages of the boys involved.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, sexual asphyxiation, autoeroticism, sadomasochism, sexual deviation

Autoerotic asphyxiation and accidental ligature strangulation are well known phenomena described in the medical literature, particularly in forensic medicine. Unfortunately a new variation of this practice has recently been discovered because it almost immediately resulted in the deaths of two young boys. Unlike autoerotic strangulation, a second party was involved who apparently enjoyed vicarious autoerotic stimulation as well as direct homosexual eroticism. An ominous aspect of this case is that the procedure was learned from a popular magazine article, hence the practice could spread via mass media attention to it.

Case Report

Two male children, aged 7 and 8 respectively, were reported missing in St. Charles County, Missouri, Tuesday, August 14, 1990. There was great concern in the neighborhood for these two boys because approximately one year prior to this incident another youth disappeared from this area and has never since been found. Local media attention was quick to respond and began broadcasting pictures of the two boys. A neighborhood search group assisted

by police K-9 patrols began searching the wooded area where one of the boys was last seen. The bodies were discovered at 10:50 p.m. on the evening of their disappearance, nude and strangled with shoestring ligatures. Eight days of intense police investigation followed, and over 400 people were interviewed. The St. Louis Area Major Case Squad and the FBI were brought into the investigation. A composite of the killer was assembled and it indicated that the killer knew the area where the boys were found, but did not necessarily live there. Leads were developed based on incidents experienced by 6 to 9 year olds who lived in the immediate vicinity. The list of suspects included 20 known sex offenders.

It was noted that the shoestring ligatures belonged to the dead children; one was tied on one body on the front of the neck and the other was tied on the other dead body with a bow knot behind the neck in a characteristic manner. During a police interview with the brother (age 13) of one of the dead boys, it was noticed that the young man's shoes were tied in the same manner as the ligature behind the one victim's neck. After careful questioning the youth confessed to engaging in consensual sexual activity with the young males during which activity ligatures were applied and the boy's "accidentally" died. This was even more unsettling to neighbors than the possibility of a known sex offender committing the acts.

Allegedly, the older boy learned of sexual asphyxiation from a "Hustler" magazine article [1]. He was engaging in homosexual activity with a friend aged 10 when his younger brother, and his younger brother's friend, chanced upon them and expressed interest in joining in the activity. Allegedly, the younger boys disrobed and one of them subsequently tied his own shoestring around his neck, with a bow knot tied in front. The older boy then sodomized that child until that child passed out. According to the older boy's testimony he thought that the victim merely "fell asleep" and if left alone would wake up. He then tied the shoestring around the other younger boys neck from behind and sodomized him until the second child "passed out." The older boys then left the two unconscious victims with ligatures tied around their necks and they subsequently died.

Autopsy Findings

Autopsy examination revealed ligature abrasions associated with ligatures found around the younger boys necks. The cause of death was determined to be ligature strangulation and the manner of death undetermined after extensive investigation of the scene findings, autopsy examination and interviews with the survivors.

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Discussion

Asphyxophilia has been defined in Innala and Ernulf [2] as "the desire for a state of oxygen deficiency in order to illicit or enhance sexual excitement and orgasm." Most of the literature written on the subject deals more specifically with autoerotic asphyxiation; that is the enhancement of the orgasm or sexual excitement by self-employed methods of asphyxiation. Such practices do not constitute a new phenomenon. A. Warren Stearns [3] describes such practices in Massachusetts going back to the 1930s. Sexual asphyxiation is described in de Sade's *Justin*. The composer Frantisek Koczwara became an international and legal sensation when he died, apparently of sexual asphyxiation in 1791 [4]. Eskimos have been known to perform sexual asphyxiation as a form of solitary or group activity [5,6].

Many descriptions of autoerotic deaths deal with cases involving teenage boys and young men [7]. In such cases a combination of ritualistic behavior, oxygen deprivation, danger and fantasy bring about sexual stimulation. Death during such behavior results from a failure in the "fail safe" mechanism that was to ensure against death, an unforeseen physiological response in such situations, or a failure in the individual's ability to control a "self endangering fantasy scenario."

Hazelwood, Dietz and Burgess [8], reviewed the most important features to examine when investigating an autoerotic death scene. The location of the scene is usually secluded. The victims position is most commonly suspended, sometimes totally but usually partially. The most common injurious agent is a ligature on the neck but other agents that can result in asphyxiation of the victim might be found; for example gags, restrictive containers, devices for the inhalation of toxic gases, etc. Almost invariably a self-rescue mechanism is employed with the injurious agent to safeguard against death. Bondage devices are frequently employed in these cases to add to the sexual stimulation (these devices can confuse the manner of death). Beyond bondage, pain may be inflicted for sexual gratification, possibly adding to diagnostic confusion.

Judd Marmor [9] discuss the difference between "normal" and "deviant" sexual behavior and points out that the difference is largely cultural. For example, behavior considered normal for a Marquesan girl would be considered delinquent in our society. Similarly, homosexuality is considered deviant in our society, but was considered normal in ancient Greece. Marmor comments that a way of categorizing a large number of sexual practices that are considered deviant in our culture is that they focus on non genital outlets for sexual expression. Other practices considered deviant in our society include sex with immature partners, animals, dead bodies or inanimate objects.

Pornography might be included with deviant behavior. Stollers [10] defines pornography as a day dream or fantasy in which sexual (usually) activities are projected into written or pictorial material to induce genital excitement for the practitioner. Voyeurism, sadism and masochism are often employed in the fantasy as an aspect of non genital sexual simulation.

Sung-ook and Uku [15] describe a case of ligature strangulation of a woman during heterosexual sadomasochistic activity. In this case the woman was tied naked, hand and foot, to the four corners of a bed. A ligature was tied around her neck, shoestring fashion, first loosely, while her partner mounted her. Sometime during the activity the partner got more and more "carried away" until he finally strangled her during the excitement. The sexual roles were

reversed in a case examined by our office in 1986, when a woman tied neck ties around her boyfriend's genitals and neck, first loosely during foreplay and then the cervical ligature was applied more forcefully in a deliberate homicide. After killing her boyfriend she subsequently carved her initials on his body with a piece of broken glass.

Conclusion

Because of the sensational way these two boys' bodies were found, coupled with intense media attention, very few people even considered the possibility that the perpetrator was barely past childhood himself. Residents in the area where the bodies were found feared a stalking child killer but the reality of the situation is perhaps even more unsettling; there is more to childhood than kind hearts and gentle deeds. A dangerous killer does not have to be depraved, or to have a police record or even be known to deviate from the norm by ordinary society.

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