

CASE REPORT

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The Rarity of “Unusal” Dispositions of Victim Bodies: Staging and Posing

ABSTRACT: 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 of the crime scene, or give perverted pleasure to the killer. The unusual position concepts of posing and staging a murder victim have been documented thoroughly and have been accepted by the courts as a definable phenomenon. One staging case and one posing case are outlined and reveal characteristics of those homicides. From the Washington State Attorney General’s Homicide Investigation and Tracking System’s database on murder covering the years 1981–2000 (a total of 5,224 cases), the relative frequency of unusual body dispositions is revealed as a very rare occurrence. Only 1.3% of victims are left in an unusual position, with 0.3% being posed and 0.1% being staged. The characteristics of these types of murders also set them apart: compared to all other murders, in staged murders the victims and killers are, on average, older. All victims and offenders in the staged murders are white, with victims being disproportionately white in murders with any kind of unusual body disposition. Likewise, females stand out as victims when the body is posed, staged, or left in other unusual positions. Whereas posed bodies are more likely to include sexual assault, often in serial murders, there is no evidence of either in the staged cases. Lastly, when a body is left in an unusual position, binding is more likely, as well as the use of more “hands on” means of killing the victim, such as stabbing or cutting weapons, bludgeons, ligatures, or hands and feet.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, staging, posing, unusual body dispositions, homicide investigation

In the great majority of murders, the killer leaves the victim’s body “where it drops.” The victim is left, typically, at the murder site or, less often, at a separate body disposal site, in a natural position for a dead person. The killer does not do anything to or with the body, above and beyond what is involved in killing or disposing of the victim. In some cases, the body disposition is “unusual”—e.g., a male victim who has been dumped and then discovered headfirst in a trash can, or a female victim who is found with her legs spread apart—because it is not a natural position for a dead body to come to rest. Clearly, the killer has done something to the victim, ante or post mortem, which has produced the unusual victim disposition. There are two subtypes of unusual body disposition, each of which is even more unusual and rare—“staging” and “posing.”

Staging

“Staging” is the purposeful alteration of the crime scene. It consists of manipulating the elements of the scene to make it appear to be something it is not. Staging has been documented thoroughly and has been accepted by the courts as a definable characteristic of a crime scene (1–6). The basis of staging is to direct an investigation away from the person who stages the crime scene, because the person feels he or she would be a likely target of the investigation.

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In his book *Practical Homicide Investigation* (4), Vernon Geberth identifies three types of crime scene staging:

1. “The most common type of “staging” occurs when the perpetrator changes the elements of the scene to make the death appear to be a suicide or accident.” (4) For example, in 1974, convicted murderer Tony Fernandez bludgeoned his wife to death. To cover up the murder and prevent the notice of a crime, he placed her body behind the steering wheel of their motor home and pushed it over an embankment, hoping to make the murder look like an accident to redirect the investigation (7,8).
2. “The second most common type of staging is when the perpetrator attempts to redirect the investigation by making the crime appear to be a sex-related homicide.” (4)
3. “Arson represents another type of staging. The offender purposely torches the crime scene to destroy evidence or make the death appear the result of an accidental fire.” (4)

Staging can be as simple as the owner of a car setting his car on fire to collect insurance and reporting his car as stolen. Another motivation for preventing detection by staging is altering a murder scene to look like a burglary or robbery gone awry. Staging a murder scene requires the killer to spend time before the murder, planning its execution, and after the victim’s death, arranging things in a certain way. The person who stages a crime scene does so based upon their own experiences and perceptions of how certain crime scenes should look. These actions go beyond the actions necessary to commit a murder.

Example of Staging

Background

On July 18, 1998, at about 2100 hours, deputies from the Pierce County Sheriff's Department in Tacoma, Washington responded to a murder at a single-story residence. A female victim's body was lying on her back on the living room couch, with her head resting on a pillow that was located on the arm of the couch. There were large amounts of dried blood on her face, neck, right arm, and pillow. The victim sustained three gunshot wounds to the chest, head, and right forehead. No other wounds of violence were noted on her body.

The body was clad in a short sleeve top over a bra, sweatpants, and socks. The sweatpants were pulled down to the victim's ankles rather than pushed down because the right pants leg was inside out. A blanket was on top of the victim covering her feet and legs and was pulled up to her waist. In her left hand was the controller for an electronic dildo. The master bedroom appeared to have been ransacked with several drawers pulled from the chest of drawers and papers and personal items scattered around the bedroom, however, no item of value appeared to be missing. No sign of forced entry was visible. The television in the living room was turned on, as was the VCR. When the VCR was set to play, a pornographic video was displayed on the TV screen.

Crime Scene Analysis

Regarding *State of Washington v. Carol J. Carlson* and *State of Washington v. Daniel D. Carlson*, a Pierce County Prosecutor had personal communication with one of the authors for purposes of determining whether or not the crime scene was staged. It was concluded that the purpose of the staging was to direct suspicion away from the identity of the perpetrator by making a murder look like a "burglary and/or rape gone bad." A multitude of factors describe the killer's efforts to stage this murder scene.

1. The most egregious staging factor is the discontinuity between the actual cause of death and staged crime scene. The two are not reconcilable. Three gunshot wounds, one to the body and two to the head, without any percussive violence, indicates a motive of power, control, and problem resolution. Conversely, the victim is staged in a setting that pretends to portray a sex murder through the use of sexual paraphernalia, sex videos, disarrayed pants, and covered genitalia. In this case, there is no evidence of percussive touching of the victim until after the killing. The perpetrator manipulated the body to stage a more heinous and different type of murder. Again, by the lack of ante-mortem, peri-mortem, and/or post-mortem percussive activity on the body of the victim, the perpetrator inadvertently exposed the fraudulent attempt to disguise the original simple motive and executed plan. Notwithstanding, it should be clear that a wandering psychopathic sex-killer would not be concerned with staging and/or focusing the law enforcement attention elsewhere. In fact, the manner of death in this case is clearly an issue of ending the victim's power and control. Of course, this would only be true for those whom she had the ability to resist.
2. The victim was not shot in the position she was found. She had been moved to that position after being shot. Typically, murder victims are discovered in the position where the death producing injuries occur, and their killers are unconcerned about how the victim is found. The victim was moved to this position; she had been pulled back to her position on the living room couch. The killer grabbed the victim's sweater, causing

it to bunch, enabling the killer to pull the victim to her place on the couch. The victim could not have caused the bunching to occur.

3. After the shooting, the victim's pants were pulled down. This occurred by someone standing at the victim's feet, pulling on the pants, thus causing the pants to turn inside out. There is no credible evidence that shows the victim could have pulled her own pants down in that position.
4. Blood spatter evidence demonstrated that the victim was fixed in place after the shooting and then moved. In order for a hair swipe to occur on the back support of the couch, the victim's hair must accumulate blood for a period of time. After this, the blood swipe from the hair could occur. Additionally, the swiping blood pattern on the victim's inner arm was evidence that her right arm came in contact with her hair while being pulled back to her final resting place.
5. The blood transfer evidence on the electronic dildo indicated that the device was placed next to the victim after the victim had bled from the shooting. There are sweeping blood transfer stains present on the cord and device that occurred while they were being positioned. Also, the device was placed in her left hand, but she was right-handed.
6. The blanket found on top of the victim was placed there after she was shot and the transfer stains had occurred on the sexual device and cord. The number of bloodstains on and around the victim contrasts with the neatness in the application of the placement of the victim, sexual device, and blanket. The body was moved from the position that it was in prior to the blood spatter patterns to the position it was found at discovery.
7. The ransacking of the chest of drawers in the victim's bedroom was a solitary event, not consistent with ransacking done in a normal burglary case. It was inconsistent because there was no other ransacking done in other rooms with valuables obviously present. Also, there was no apparent loss of any valuable items. Traditionally, televisions, VCRs, and computer equipment would have been moved or removed. But these items appeared untouched and were not disturbed. Additionally, more inconsistencies in the ransacking were present. The drawers were removed from the chest of drawers. One drawer was not overturned, and another blocked the removal of a drawer from the second and third level of the chest of drawers. The blocking drawer would have been thrown out of the way by a curious burglar. The contents of these drawers were not gone through in a typical manner. One drawer was just pulled out and set on top of other contents, but not overturned. The bottom drawers did not appear to ever have been opened. In burglary crimes, when there is rifling through drawers, the contents are usually disturbed, even dumped out or strewn about. But in this case, there was no noticeable disturbance of the contents of one drawer that was removed from the bedroom chest of drawers. Only drawers containing items belonging to Lisa Carlson were rifled through in the house.
8. The telephone answering tape was tampered with. There was an expectation there would be a sequence of messages that were left on the tape. It was detected that two messages overlapped, and this could only occur if someone tampered with the tape recording.

Summary of Staging Example

A killer's method of operation contains those actions that are necessary to commit a murder. The killer did a number of things

beyond committing the murder, which were highly personalized efforts to stage the scene, such as: moving the victim from the place she was shot to the place she was discovered, placing the on/off switch to the electronic dildo in her wrong hand, placing a blanket over her lower torso after smearing blood on items and clothing under the blanket, leaving drawers open with atypical burglary and theft disturbance, manipulating the tape on the victim's telephone messaging machine, and either not removing anything or removing only small items with other typical burglary loot in plain sight ready for the taking.

Posing

The act of deliberate posing involves positioning of the victim's body, like posing a person for a photograph. In one case of posing, a deranged killer repositioned mutilated and amputated body parts back in their correct anatomical positions. In another investigation, a mother and daughter were found nude in their home. The mother was located on a couch, eviscerated, and her vagina inserted in her mouth. The mother's breasts were found in the bedroom where the daughter was discovered. The daughter was also eviscerated and a baseball bat inserted in her vaginal area. Investigators concluded that the killer positioned these two victims for "shock value" (3). Two purposes of posing are to leave the victim in a sexually degrading position: 1) to shock the finder of the body or police investigators, and 2) for the killer's own pleasure. 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 that it is not (7,8).

Example of Posing

Background

The nude body of a female was found in a refuse area behind a popular restaurant. Investigators concluded that the body was clearly posed and placed in an open, displayed manner. She was found lying on her back with her left foot crossed over the instep of her right ankle. The victim's head was turned to the left with a snack food lid resting on top of her right eye. Debris from a dirt pile within three feet of her body was used to hold the lid in place. Her arms were bent at the elbow and crossed over her abdomen with her hands, one inside the other. Inside her hands was a Douglas fir cone (7,8,11).

The surface of the garbage area was a cement rectangle, bordered by the asphalt pavement of the parking lot and a wooden fence. The refuse area had just been swept by someone. In front of the trash compactor, located inside the garbage area, several bloodstains and chips of fingernail polish from the victim were found. Investigators concluded from this evidence that the killer had originally taken the victim further into the garbage area, which would have been more secluded, but instead the killer posed the victim prominently back toward the entrance so she could be seen clearly (7,8,11).

At the post-mortem examination, it was determined that the victim received blunt impact injuries to the head, resulting in a fracture to the right base of the cranium, and blunt injuries to the abdomen, causing a laceration of the liver. Also, it was determined that forcible rape had transpired as evidenced by the victim's anal canal being severely lacerated by an unknown foreign object (7,8,11).

Investigation revealed that the victim was a white female, 27 years old, 5 feet 7 in. tall, and 150 lb. She was last seen alive in the early morning hours at a popular, trendy, singles bar and dance spot. The bar was located about one mile northwest of the

restaurant where the victim was found. In the bar's parking lot, the victim's 1984 Chevrolet Camaro was parked, undisturbed and with nothing removed from it. Her purse, which contained her car keys, was found in the lost-and-found property at the bar. Detectives surmised that the victim had met someone at the bar and left with that person, intending to return and retrieve her purse and car (7,8,11).

Posing Case Analysis

Detectives from the Bellevue Police Department contacted personnel from the Washington State Attorney General's Homicide Investigation Tracking System (HITS) (10). Detectives requested that the characteristic of posing be compared against the database of murders to determine the uniqueness of this type of offender behavior. In 1990, there were 2,115 murders in the HITS database. After searching the database, only six cases were discovered. It was determined that posing a murder victim's body is indeed very rare.

Unusual Positioning Data Analysis

Frequency

One thing these types of cases has in common, in addition to their unusual victim body dispositions, is their rarity among all murders. Fortunately, we have been able to determine their relative frequencies and some characteristics by analyzing data on all of the murders that have occurred in Washington state from 1981–2000—a total of 5,224 cases.

The HITS database includes the total population of murders, solved and unsolved, for those years, as well as hundreds of variables on each case, including a couple of items that pertain directly to the position of victim bodies. One of those variables was used to identify those cases where a victim was left in an unusual position—"Did the offender intentionally place the body in an unusual position? (e.g., staged or posed)." For each of the 67 affirmative responses, the case summaries also were reviewed in order to classify the type of unusual body position, either posed, staged, or other unusual. The two authors, working independently, reviewed each of the case summaries and classified the cases into one of the three categories. There was 100% agreement on identifying the staged and posed cases, and therefore, on the other unusual body dispositions.

Based on analysis of the data, there is no doubt that finding a victim's body in an unusual position is rare among all murders. Only 1.3% ($n = 67$) of all of the cases include victims whose bodies are left in some unusual position. Most of those ($n = 47$) are bodies found in unusual positions that do not indicate or suggest that the killer was posing or staging the victims. They represent only 0.9% of all murders. Those victims who are posed or staged are even more exceptional. Only 14 (0.3%) have been posed, and merely 6 (0.1%) have been staged. Viewed another way, among the 67 murders where the victim is disposed of in some unusual manner, 20.9% are staged, and 9% are posed, leaving 70.1% which are unusual but not staged or posed.

Posing a victim's body or staging a murder scene occurs so infrequently that it is unlikely that most violent crime investigators will ever investigate a murder that has been staged or posed. For those who will, knowledge about their frequency and characteristics is even more important than the common knowledge about garden-variety murders, simply because it is likely that there is no personal investigative experience to draw upon. If an investigator is presented with this type of case, the best and perhaps only investigative resource may be available knowledge and information.

These unusual dispositions of victim bodies suggest certain types of murder, killers, motives, and other characteristics that may be useful in focusing investigations. The best way to learn about them and, therefore, to be as prepared as possible, is from empirical observation—from the experience of detectives who have investigated these types of cases and from research and data analysis.

Characteristics

Given the small number of staged and posed cases, complex statistical analyses are not possible. However, simple descriptive analyses of the data are possible, and they suggest a number of potential differentiating characteristics among the four types of victim body positions (staged, posed, unusual, not unusual). The observations and conclusions must be drawn cautiously, but the fact that the analyses are based on the total population of murders in Washington State from 1981–2000, rather than a sample of murders, means that the small number of these cases is less problematic than in analyses of samples of these types of murder.

Beginning with standard sociodemographic characteristics, it appears that the age of victims and offenders differs among the disposition types. What the data suggest is that there are differences in the average age of victims compared to offenders in murders that are “staged.” They are substantially older than the average ages for all victims and killers—46 compared to 32 for victims and 38 versus 30 for offenders.

Among the staged victims, 60% are over 40 years old, compared to 28% of those posed, 19% of those in other unusual positions, and 27% of the total. The age of offenders who stage murder scenes is even more unique—60% of them are also over 40 years old, but there are zero offenders in this age range who pose their victims, only 9% who place the victim in unusual positions, and 19% of those cases where the body is not in any unusual position. Equally telling is the absence of young adults and juveniles from murders where there is staging—among the staged murders, there are no killers 25 years old or younger, compared to 33% of those offenders who pose their victims, 50% of those who place them in unusual positions, and 45% of those who leave them in natural positions.

There also are apparent differences in the race/ethnicity of the victims and offenders. The data suggest that murders which are staged involve predominantly white victims and offenders. All of the victims and all of the killers in staged murders are white. Of course, because of the small number of cases, this does not mean that in all staged murders this will be true, but it does suggest that it is much more likely. This becomes more evident when comparing the other types of body disposition.

The victims are disproportionately white in all of the murders which include unusual body positions: Compared to 61% of victims who are not found in unusual positions, 100% of the staged victims, 93% of the posed victims, and 81% of the victims in other unusual positions are white. Likewise, this means that minority victims are underrepresented among victims whose bodies are left and found in unusual positions. For the offenders, it is a less clear picture: As reported, all of the killers in the staged murders are white, but there is no apparent pattern for the other types of body dispositions.

What can be concluded, cautiously, is that staged murders are more likely to involve a white killer; murders where the bodies are in other unusual positions are somewhat more likely to be committed by white killers; and posed murders are more likely to include killers from other race/ethnic groups.

The gender of the victim is also related to being found in an unusual position. One of the most consistently strong correlations of murder, both the perpetration and the victimization, is gender—

about 90% of murders are committed by males, and the great majority of victims, around two-thirds of them, are also males. However, in relation to victim body disposition, females contribute disproportionately to those victims who have been staged (50%), posed (100%), and left in other unusual positions (64%), even though they account for only 34% of the victims. Clearly, the bodies of female murder victims are more likely to be left in unusual positions.

When one examines some of the characteristics of the murder, it becomes apparent that different types of murder are associated with the unusual disposition of victim bodies. Even though only 3.6% of all of the murder cases are considered to be “series or potential series,” when a body is found in an unusual position—particularly when the victim is posed (57%)—it is more likely that a serial killer is at work. And posing victims in serial murders is also typically a signature characteristic (7). However, this is not true for staged murders, where 100% are not part of a series or potential series.

The ways in which the victims are killed vary across types of body disposition. For all murders, 10% of victims are bound in some way by the killer, but in murders which are staged, 50% are bound, while 43% of posed victims and 28% of those in other unusual positions also show evidence of binding.

Compared to the 5% of all cases where there has been a sexual assault, there is evidence in murders where the body is posed that many of the victims have been sexually assaulted. In 71% of the posed victims, there is physical evidence of sexual assault. To the contrary, there is no evidence of sexual assault in any of the staged murders. Of course, sexual assault, motivations, or overtones are markers for serial murder.

The choice of weapons used in the murders differs across the types of body disposition. Overall, killers who commit murders that do not include leaving or placing a body in an unusual position are much more likely to use firearms (as in over half of the murders) and less likely to use other weapons. To the contrary, when a body is found in an unusual position, it is less likely that a gun has been used. For example, a gun is used in only 7% of the cases when a victim is posed, in 15% of cases of those found in another unusual position, and in 33% of cases among murders that are staged.

In the great majority of murders where the victim is left in an unusual position, it is more likely that a “hands on” kind of weapon has been used to kill the victim. This is particularly true in cases where a victim has been posed, another feature of most serial murders. Compared to 19% of all murders, 43% of posed victims, but no staged victims, are killed with a stabbing or cutting weapon. Only 10% of all murders involve the use of a bludgeon or club, versus 33% of those staged, 29% of those posed, and 28% of those with another unusual body disposition. They are even more likely to involve the use of a ligature in killing the victim. Compared to 3% of all murders, 17% of the staged victims, 21% of those who are posed, and 17% found in other unusual positions are killed with a ligature. Likewise, killers who stage (17%) the murder, pose (21%) the victim, or leave the body in another unusual position (21%), are more likely than in all murders (10%) to use their hands or feet in the murder assault.

Conclusion

Placing bodies in unusual positions occurs when the perpetrator purposely alters the crime scene and/or victim’s body disposition. It requires that the offender spend time planning the events leading up to murder and rearranging the body and crime scene after the victim’s death. Based on the analyses done here, the act of rearranging a victim’s body at a murder scene or body recovery site is

a very rare occurrence, and the presence of such a scene may go unnoticed by inexperienced homicide investigators.

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Erratum

Erratum/Correction of Keppel D and Weis JG. The Rarity of “Unusual” Dispositions of Victim Bodies: Staging and Posing. *J Forensic Sci* 2004 Nov;49(6):1308–1312.

The current sentence reads, “Viewed another way, among the 67 murders where the victim is disposed of in some unusual manner, 20.9% are staged, and 9% are posed, leaving 70.1% which are unusual but not staged or posed.”

The corrected version should read, “Viewed another way, among the 67 murders where the victim is disposed of in some unusual manner, 20.9% are posed, and 9% are staged, leaving 70.1% which are unusual but not staged or posed.”

Also, the word “Unusual” is misspelled in the title inadvertently.

The Journal regrets this error. Note: Any and all future citations of the above-referenced paper should read: Keppel D and Weis JG. The Rarity of “Unusual” Dispositions of Victim Bodies: Staging and Posing. [Published erratum appears in *J Forensic Sci* 2005 Sept;50(5)] *J Forensic Sci* 2004 Nov;49(6):1308–1312.