

PAPER
PSYCHIATRY

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Necrophilia and Sexual Homicide

ABSTRACT: A closed case-file review of 211 sexual homicides identified 16 cases of necrophilia. The results of this unique descriptive study of necrophilia associated with sexual homicide provide information on crime-scene locations, methods of killing, body disposition, premortem sexual assault, specifics of the necrophilic acts, methods of victim abduction, and motivational dynamics. The findings suggest that the most common explanation for necrophilia—the offender's desire to have an unresisting partner—may not always be applicable in cases where this rare paraphilia is connected to sexual murder. The possibility of using crime-scene behaviors in these cases to investigate serial sexual murders is offered.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic psychology, forensic psychiatry, necrophilia, sexual homicide, investigation

Necrophilia literally means love of the dead and is generally defined as sexual relations with corpses. The disorder has been recognized since ancient times, has been popularized in myths and literature, and can even be found as a theme in some contemporary death-metal music. Most of what we know about necrophilia comes from single-case reports beginning with Krafft-Ebing's (1) study of Sergeant Bertrand and Ardisson. Several of the early psychoanalysts (2–5) offered opinions on necrophilia; curiously, Freud (6) had little to say on the topic except for a brief mention of it, followed by “enough of this kind of horror!” (p. 306). Currently, necrophilia is classified by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* (7) as an unspecified paraphilia with no generally agreed upon specific diagnostic criteria except for post-mortem sexual activity with a body. The disorder is considered relatively rare; however, its true prevalence is unknown and is perhaps unknowable. There appears to be an increased tendency of necrophiliacs obtaining jobs in morgues or funeral parlors in order to have solitary access to dead bodies, and, in rare cases, such offenders have disinterred corpses (8).

In some instances, necrophiles—who have a strong desire to engage in the act—have even killed in order to get a corpse (9). For example, Smith and Braun (10) presented a case of a man who became preoccupied with dead bodies, visited cemeteries, and obtained a job as a hospital orderly where he had sex with a dead girl in the morgue. He strangled and sexually assaulted about 20 different females before eventually killing a woman and engaging in necrophilia. Lancaster (11) reported the case of a man who broke into mortuaries in order to have sex with female corpses. He eventually broke into a home, stabbed to death the female occupant and her dog, and then performed necrophilic acts with the woman's corpse. Rosman and Resnick (12) studied 122 cases of necrophilia and found 14 subjects (12% of their sample) who committed homicide to obtain a corpse for sexual purposes.

Another necrophilia subgroup identified by Rosman and Resnick (12) is “pseudonecrophilia”; it involves “a transient attraction to a corpse, but corpses are not the object of [the offenders'] sexual fantasies” (p. 155). In their pseudonecrophilia subgroup, 33 offenders (27% of their sample) committed a murder for reasons other than to obtain a corpse. Although these researchers provided some interesting information on their “pseudonecrophilic killers,” they did not provide any details of the motivation for the homicides. They did, however, report one illustrative case of a 37-year-old male who accidentally shot and killed his girlfriend; he then became sexually aroused by the dead body and had anal intercourse with the corpse.

Although the literature on necrophilia is sparse, the association of necrophilia with sexual homicide has been consistently recognized. In these instances, the primary motivation for the murder was sexual gratification, or the homicide was triggered by an eruption of sexual conflicts followed by impulsive engagement in necrophilic acts. Krafft-Ebing (1) was likely the first to acknowledge the relationship between sexual murder and necrophilia. He reported the case of a 23-year-old man who attempted to rape a 53-year-old woman and killed her. He then engaged in necrophilia, threw her in the water, retrieved the body, and violated the corpse again. DeRiver (13) also found a strong connection between these two extraordinary behaviors: “They hang together, as if one psychologically. [Such offenders] seek pleasure not only in bringing about the deaths of the victims...but also in finding an indescribable gratification and satisfaction of their passion in postmortem mating with the victim they had tortured to death” (p. 41).

In many reported cases of sexual murderers who engaged in necrophilia, a large number seemed to have had erectile dysfunction and preoccupation with feelings of sexual inadequacy. For example, Hirschfeld (14) described the case of Bruno, a timid, depressed, and self-conscious man who was preoccupied with his failure to get an erection in numerous attempts at intercourse. At the age of 30, he became angry at and frightened by a prostitute who behaved seductively toward him. When she grabbed him during foreplay, he choked her to death, tore her clothes off, stabbed her in the left breast, hit her with his fist, and placed a wire around her throat for further choking. He then attempted intercourse with her body with a partial erection.

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Received 3 Nov. 2008; and in revised form 29 Jan. 2009; accepted 3 Mar. 2009.

Schlesinger (15) described two cases of sexual murder triggered, in part, by an eruption of long-standing feelings of sexual inadequacy that emerged after brief interaction with the victims. In the first case, an 18-year-old high school student strangled a 22-year-old female nightclub entertainer after he was unable to obtain an erection and she commented, "Go home to your mother." He explained that once the victim was dead and no longer threatening, he was able to penetrate her. The second case involved a 30-year-old teacher who suddenly murdered a 10-year-old girl when she came to his door to sell magazine subscriptions. He felt angry and humiliated by one of the child's comments, forced her to the basement, choked and beat her, smashed her head against the floor, and ultimately raped her multiple times after she died. His explanation for necrophilia was that it allowed the "total domination of man over woman." This offender had long-standing feelings of sexual inadequacy, impotency problems, and self-hatred, as well as strong feelings of inferiority in many aspects of his life.

To further understand the relationship between necrophilia and sexual homicide—and to gain additional insight into both criminal behaviors—a descriptive study was conducted.

Method

A nonrandom national sample of 211 sexual-homicide cases (supplied by the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit) was reviewed for the presence of necrophilia. They were all closed, fully adjudicated cases contributed by law-enforcement agencies around the country for research purposes. Sexual homicide was operationally defined by using Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas's (16) criteria: victim attire or lack of attire, exposure of sexual parts of the victim, sexual positioning, object insertion, sexual penetration, or evidence of substitute sexual activity, interest, or sadistic fantasy. In 16 cases (7.6% of the sample), the offender engaged in necrophilic acts (sexual relations with a corpse) as confirmed by the investigators and the medical examiners. All identifiers of offenders, victims, and agencies have been removed.

Subjects

Offenders

All 16 offenders were male, with a mean age of 26.1 (range 14–38) years. Ten offenders committed single victim sexual homicide. Two offenders committed single victim sexual homicide with an accomplice who did not engage in necrophilia. Two offenders murdered a woman together and both took turns performing necrophilic acts on the victim. One serial offender (to be referred to as serial offender *a*) had four victims but only performed necrophilic acts on two of them. The other serial offender *b* in the sample had two victims (and two other attempted homicides), but only performed necrophilic acts on one victim. Necrophilia was suspected but never confirmed in this subject's other homicide victim.

Of the offenders, 56.2% ($n = 9$) were Caucasian and 43.8% ($n = 7$) were African-American. In those cases where employment status was known, 50% ($n = 8$) of the offenders were laborers/blue-collar workers, none were white-collar, one was a prison inmate, and 43.8% ($n = 7$) were unemployed. Two of the offenders (12.5%) were married, 10 (62.5%) were single, and four (25%) had girlfriends. Living arrangements varied: Two (12.5%) of our subjects were living alone at the time of the offense; the two married offenders (12.5%) lived with their wives; two (12.5%) individuals lived with their girlfriends, four (25%) with their parents, two (12.5%) in group homes, and one (6.3%) with a friend; one (6.3%)

resided in jail, and two (12.5%) were homeless. Where background information (typically without detail) was available regarding offenders' psychopathology, 12.5% ($n = 2$) were considered to have conduct disorder, 56.3% ($n = 9$) were considered to have antisocial personality disorder, 6.3% ($n = 1$) mental retardation, and none were found to have any documented psychotic symptoms.

Available arrest records of most offenders—which almost always underestimate the actual number of crimes committed—were also reviewed. Of the 14 offenders whose criminal histories were available, 13 (92.9%) had previous arrests: specifically, 57.1% ($n = 8$) had one or more previous arrests for rape or attempted rape, 57.1% ($n = 8$) had arrests for burglary, 21.4% ($n = 3$) for robbery, 7.1% ($n = 1$) for theft, and 42.9% ($n = 6$) for assault (two with intent to kill). One offender who had never been arrested admitted to committing prior rapes, burglaries, assaults, and an armed robbery, as well as to killing his girlfriend's cat and torturing and raping his former girlfriend.

Victims

Fifteen of the 16 necrophilia-homicide victims (93.8%) were female with a mean age of 30.4 years (range 6–79 years). Five victims (31.3%) were 18 years old or younger, while three (18.8%) were 10 years old or younger. Seven (43.8%) of the victims were total strangers to the offender, three victims (18.8%) were neighbors, while two (12.5%) were acquaintances; one victim was the offender's niece, one was a young girl known by the offender through her father, and one victim was the offender's live-in girlfriend. The one male victim was killed by his two friends/lovers. Two victims (12.5%) were African-American and 14 (87.5%) were Caucasian. Of the 14 cases where marital status was known, 14.3% ($n = 2$) were married, 21.4% ($n = 3$) were in committed relationships, and 64.3% ($n = 9$) were single. Of the 14 cases where the victim's living arrangements were known, three victims (21.4%) were living alone at the time of the offense; 57.1% ($n = 8$) were living with their parents; the two married victims were living with their husbands (neither had children); and one victim was living with her boyfriend.

Results

Crime-Scene Characteristics

Location—Five of the 16 necrophilia-homicides (31.3%) occurred in the victim's home, while four (25%) occurred in a wooded area. One homicide occurred in the offender's home after he lured his 7-year-old female victim inside; one murder took place in the prison where the offender was an inmate (the victim was a female correctional officer); one victim was killed in a cemetery where she was subsequently buried; one murder occurred at a housing project under construction, and another behind a store that was closed at the time. One victim was killed by her uncle in the home they both occupied, and one murder took place in the mutual home of the offender and his live-in girlfriend.

Method of Killing—Strangulation was the method of killing in 11 out of 16 (68.8%) homicides; in four of the 11 cases (36.4%) strangulation was combined with another method. Manual strangulation was twice as common as ligature strangulation; one offender used both in conjunction with suffocation. Two of the 16 victims (12.5%) were beaten to death and one victim was stabbed once in the chest. The two victims of serial offender *a* were suffocated—one with a cloth soaked in starter fluid and the other with the offender's hands covering her mouth and nose.

Body Disposition—Eleven of the 16 victims (68.8%) were left at the location of the murder with no effort by the offender to conceal the body. Two offenders moved their victims' bodies; one was left in a creek and the other in bushes on the side of the road in an urban area. One offender hid the corpse of his victim in his attic, and one of the serial offenders buried all his victims. Nine victims (56.3%) were found completely nude, while six (37.6%) were found partially nude. Of the victims found partially nude, five were unclothed from the waist down and one was unclothed from the waist up. Five of the victims who were left completely or partially exposed had their pants or underwear pulled down around their legs rather than being completely off. Only one victim (a 6-year-old girl) was found fully clothed. Two victims were found with ligatures wrapped around their necks. The offender who committed the murder in prison left his belt wrapped around his victim's neck; the two men who killed a prostitute behind a store (where only one committed a necrophilic act) left the victim with a rope around her neck.

Premortem Sexual Assault—Seven of the 16 victims (43.8%) were raped prior to their death. Four victims were raped vaginally, one victim vaginally and orally, and serial offender *a* confessed to raping both his victims orally, vaginally, and anally.

Necrophilic Acts—Fifteen of the 16 victims (93.8%) were violated immediately following their death. One of serial offender *a*'s victims was disinterred several days after he killed her and then penetrated. Serial offender *a* reported performing necrophilic acts on two victims, but the details of these acts were not provided in his statements, and the victims' bodies were too decomposed by the time they were found for valid conclusions to be drawn. Of the remaining 14 victims, seven were violated vaginally, five anally, one vaginally and anally, and one vaginally and orally. In one case, the victim was a male and the two co-offenders were openly homosexual. Here, one of the offenders violently penetrated the victim's anus with a tree branch after performing necrophilic acts.

Victim Abduction—In seven (43.8%) cases, the offender met and abducted the victim in one location and transported the individual to the murder location. For example, serial offender *a* abducted his first victim from her house and drove her to a rural area where he strangled her to death. He abducted his other victim at knife-point and took her to a cemetery in the trunk of his car. One victim was grabbed by the offender while jogging along the road and forced into the woods; one victim was abducted at gunpoint in her car at a bar parking lot; and one victim was abducted along a main roadway at a gas station a half block from her house, where she drove nightly to use the pay phone. Three offenders (18.8%) broke into victims' homes and killed them there. Two offenders gained their victims' trust through manipulation: a 68-year-old woman gave the offender a ride from a store and he attacked her upon arrival at their destination, while another offender convinced his 7-year-old victim to accompany him to his home to retrieve his guitar. One victim opened the door to her killer because he was the neighborhood boy who cut her lawn. The incarcerated offender followed his victim into an area of the prison that was unoccupied and killed her using a blitz-style attack.

Additional Crime-Scene Behaviors—Four of the offenders (25%) took money or possessions of value belonging to the victim, while two offenders kept souvenirs, such as their victims' underwear or jewelry. Two of the offenders bound their victims' wrists together, one with the victim's headband and another with the victim's shoelaces. Two offenders revisited the crime scenes after they

left the bodies but did not engage in any further necrophilic acts. Three offenders bit their victims' nipples; serial offender *b* bit his victim's nipple, took her purse with \$120 in cash, and left her body posed after death in a supine position, nude from the waist down, with her legs spread and arms extended.

Motivational Dynamics—A conclusive explanation of the motivational dynamics of these subjects is not possible, but statements by offenders and opinions of investigators provide some understanding of this rare posthomicidal conduct. For instance, all of the offenders denied committing the homicide specifically to obtain a corpse, and none would explain their motivation for having sexual involvement with the corpse. Two of the offenders rationalized the homicide and necrophilia as a consequence of being in an intoxicated state. Those involved in the investigations concluded that the offenders' primary intention in all these cases was homicide; they viewed the necrophilia as possibly engaged in because the murder itself was not sufficiently satisfying to the offender.

Discussion

Homicide is the least common crime (17) and sexual homicide has been estimated to constitute <1% of all murders (18); sexual homicide involving necrophilia is even less common (19). Deitz (20) has argued that the rarity of such behavior has contributed to the dearth of scientific study on these topics because ordinary behavioral-science research methods cannot be easily employed. Not surprisingly, only one empirical study of necrophilia (12) has been conducted, and our current research is the only empirical investigation of necrophilia associated with sexual murder.

The most common explanation for necrophilia is that offenders need to have an unresisting and unrejecting partner (12). Krafft-Ebing (1) first commented on this motivational dynamic: "the lifeless condition itself...a human form absolutely without will...is seen to be capable of absolute subjugation, without the possibility of resistance" (p. 102). However, since six of our subjects were involved in marital or marital-like relationships and almost half the victims we studied were raped prior to death—as well as after—it would seem that these offenders did not need an unresisting partner in order to perform sexually. Accordingly, the most common explanation for necrophilia may not always be applicable in cases where necrophilia is connected to sexual homicide.

Several authors have put forth other views of the motivational dynamics of necrophilia, specifically when it occurs in association with sexual murder. For example, DeRiver (13) believes that these offenders have a desire to further destroy and degrade their already lifeless victims. Masters (9) agrees with this position, finding that necrophilic acts associated with sexual murder are "an extension of [the offender's] violation of the victim" (p. 116). More recently, Hazelwood and Douglas (21) have offered a much different theory of the connection between necrophilia and sexual murder; they conclude that in these cases offenders seek to "outrage society and call attention to [their] total disdain for societal acceptance" (p. 3).

Since none of our subjects killed in order to obtain a corpse, they cannot be included in Rosman and Resnick's (12) necrophilic-homicide group. Instead, our subjects seem most similar to Rosman and Resnick's pseudonecrophilia killers. In fact, in all the dimensions studied, the only minor differences between our sample and the sample of pseudonecrophilic killers were that our offenders were more often in a committed relationship, were diagnosed more frequently with a personality disorder, and had less psychotic illness.

Necrophilia connected with sexual homicide is clearly rare and quite bizarre; however, engaging in such behavior should not

immediately be seen as an indication of a psychosis or as a break with reality, nor should it be used as the sole basis for a finding of mental disease or defect from a forensic/legal perspective. We agree with Dietz, Hazelwood, and Warren (22) who found that many experienced clinicians often incorrectly "find themselves tempted to ascribe psychosis to those [individuals] who engage in extraordinary cruel acts despite the absence of delusions, hallucinations, or markedly illogical thinking" (p. 164). In fact, most sexual murderers are not psychotic (15,18,23,24), and there was no adequate information or documentation that any of the sexual murderers in our study who engaged in necrophilic acts displayed indications of a psychotic process. Moreover, it should also be pointed out that cases of necrophilia not associated with homicide may present a different profile than the individuals in our sample.

Necrophilia encountered in cases of serial sexual murder might be viewed as ritualistic or signature behavior (25,26), wherein engaging in this activity is sexually stimulating and part of the offender's perverse sexual-arousal pattern. Accordingly, when necrophilia occurs in serial sexual-murder cases it could be used—along with other evidence—as an investigative aid for linking crimes to the same offender, given the extreme rarity and distinctiveness of necrophilic acts.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit. The authors' opinions, statements, and conclusions should not be considered an endorsement by the FBI of any policy, program, or service.

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