

CASE REPORT**PATHOLOGY AND BIOLOGY**

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Decapitation and Dismemberment of the Corpse: A Matricide Case*

ABSTRACT: Dismemberment of a corpse has always been viewed by society to be a more hideous crime than the homicide itself. In this study, we present a case of a 57-year-old woman who was decapitated and her right arm and both hands were dismembered. It was determined that the victim was murdered and dismembered by her 33-year-old daughter, who had been receiving treatment for schizophrenia for 15 years. On the victim's head and back there were 71 incised and stab wounds in total. They were superficial, except the five stab wounds which were connected to the right chest cavity and which incapacitated the victim. Although there is not a regulation for the act of dismembering the corpse in the Turkish Penal Code, since this type of case is rare, the crime scene and the autopsy findings were evaluated together with other pertinent data available in the literature.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, homicide, matricide, decapitation, dismemberment, mutilation

Dismemberment is in reality a relatively rare method whereby after killing the victim, the murderer uses a very sharp cutting weapon (a saw, axe, etc.) to sever the limbs and cut the body into small pieces. The operation is generally carried out immediately after the crime, although more rarely a long time may pass between the two events. Dismemberment of the corpse allows the murderer to clear the scene of the crime to delay investigations until the body is found. It also makes it easier to transport the body even for long distances, during times of day when possible witnesses could be about, without raising suspicion (1). Cases of criminal corpse dismemberment are not commonly encountered in the medicolegal practice; German sources report one such incident per *c.* 500 autopsies (2).

In the Konya province of Turkey, dismembering bodies can be observed as a result of accidents and suicides, such as when a train strikes a pedestrian and in road traffic accidents involving heavy trucks or a multiple vehicle crash. In fact, only 7 (0.2%) out of the 3940 death examinations and autopsies carried out between 2000 and 2007 involved cases of dismembered bodies. Four of them were suicides involving the victims' jumping onto railway tracks in front of moving trains, and two of the cases were killed in road traffic accidents. This case is the only dismemberment event that occurred as a result of a homicide, and it only made up 2.5/10,000 of all medicolegal deaths over the same period.

Matricide is defined as the killing of a mother by her child, and is one of the rarest of reported homicides with rates varying between 1% and 4% of all murders (3,4) and is almost exclusively a crime of sons (5). Two small studies of matricide in Canada (6)

and England (7) both found a substantial association with schizophrenia, and a Scottish study (8) of homicide, which included just four matricides, concluded that "matricide is the schizophrenic crime."

The crime scene and the autopsy findings of a matricide case by decapitation and dismemberment by the victim's schizophrenic daughter are evaluated together with the data in the literature, as a similar case report could not be found in the literature review.

Case Report

A 57-year-old woman who was divorced from her spouse 10 years prior was living with her schizophrenic daughter. Her neighbors called the police on the day of the crime because they had heard her screams coming from her home and she had not gone to the previously planned home meeting.

Upon entering the house, the police found the victim's corpse between the bed and wardrobe in a prone position. The 33-year-old daughter of the victim was sitting on the bed. The victim's decapitated head, right arm and both hands were found in a cardboard box near the bed. The neck part of the victim's underwear was cut. It was observed that there was an attempt to clean the blood from the floor. A bloody sports suit that belonged to the victim's daughter was found in the washing machine in the bathroom. It was observed that the edges of the squat toilet were broken, and a hammer was found in the threshold of the kitchen, which was suspected to have been used to break the toilet edges. On the kitchen counter, two washed knives were found.

Examination of the corpse showed that the head had been severed from the trunk between the first and the second cervical vertebrae. The right upper limb had been separated from the trunk by cutting along a plane at the level of the scapulohumeral joint. Both hands had been separated from the forearms at the level of the wrists (Fig. 1). On the victim's head (Fig. 2) and back there were 71 incised and stab wounds in total. Both of the victim's hands had cuts that were consistent with defensive wounds (Fig. 3). The right

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FIG. 1—The victim's decapitated and dismembered corpse.

ear was separated from the head. On the outer surface of the left forearm, there was a 5×5 cm bite mark with ecchymosis. In the internal examination, five stab wounds were noted on the upper lobe of the right lung. There were color changes on the right lung surface that were consistent with blood aspiration. Blood was noted in the trachea and main bronchia. There was 100 mL of blood in the right chest cavity. All of the inner organs seemed pale. It was determined that the incised and stab wounds on the victim's head and back were superficial, except the five stab wounds which were connected to the right chest cavity and which incapacitated the victim. During the histopathological examination, subcutaneous hemorrhages were noted in the wounds on the head, neck, back, palms, and in the bitten area, but not in the wounds on the wrists and right shoulder. Toxicological analysis was not performed. Death was attributed to the massive neck injuries in combination with blood aspiration and exsanguination.

When the victim's daughter was interrogated, the accused confessed that she had killed her mother because her mother always criticized and humiliated her. She also confessed that first she had cut her mother's throat and then she had stabbed her from her back. One hour after killing her, she had decapitated and dismembered



FIG. 2—Multiple incised and stab wounds were noted on the victim's head.



FIG. 3—The defensive wounds observed on the palmar surfaces of the hands.

her mother's body and had planned to discard the remains in the toilet. For that purpose, she had broken the edges of the squat toilet in an effort to widen it enough to discard the parts that she had dismembered. It was discovered that the accused had been receiving treatment for schizophrenia for 15 years. In her psychiatric examination, it was understood that her illness was in an active stage during the crime. Interviews with the relatives of the family revealed that the daughter always lived at home and she was not working. She had one brother who was married and living in another house. There was not anyone living in the house at the time. There was not a history of domestic violence in the household. The mother had not a history of mental illness. Neither the mother, nor the daughter had a history of substance abuse or crime.

Discussion

In the Middle Ages, particularly grave crimes were punished with death, but an offender was also sentenced to additional punishment—dismemberment (*truncation membrorum*) of his corpse, with the remains being for example scattered to the four winds (9). Decapitation of bodies, although not uncommon in a situation of armed conflict, is a rare event in the civilian setting and accounts for about 0.1% of forensic autopsies (10). Decapitation has been reported in cases of suicidal, homicidal, and accidental deaths, and there are examples of autopsy findings that are indicative of each mode of death (9,11–15).

The perpetrators of criminal corpse dismemberment act mostly with the aim of facilitating body removal, covering up the traces of the crime, and hindering identification (defensive mutilation). More rarely, they are motivated by other factors: aggression against the victim, expressed after the individual's death (aggressive mutilation); dismemberment that accompanies lust murders or necrosadistic murders (offensive mutilation); as well as winning a trophy or a fetish (necromaniac mutilation) (16). In defensive mutilations, the perpetrator divides the body of the victim into pieces that allow for transporting the corpse and concealing it where it will not be noticed. In the majority of cases, the head and extremities are cut off the trunk, or the body is cut in halves across the trunk (9). Additional injuries besides decapitation and dismemberment of our case are compatible with an aggressive type of mutilation, but breaking the edges of a squat toilet for the aim of body removal is compatible with defensive mutilation. So a combination of aggressive and defensive mutilation may be suggested for our case.

Konopka et al. (9) reported that homicides ending with corpse dismemberment are most commonly committed by a person close to, or at least acquainted with the victim and dismemberment is nearly always performed at the site of homicide, generally in the place inhabited by the perpetrator. Our victim was the mother of the offender and dismemberment was performed in her house which was also the site of homicide.

Children killing parents has generated enormous interest for hundreds of years. The slaying of parents, commonly referred to as parricide, is a phenomenon that has captured media attention across cultures and continues to shock the public (17). Family members, particularly mothers, have been reported in previous studies to have an increased risk of being the target of violence (18–20). Matricides usually involve the use of a weapon, with stabbings and bashings being the most common methods employed (4,21).

Mental abnormality is more likely in those who murder a member of their family than in those who murder a stranger (5). In Green's study (3) where 58 sons who killed their mothers were evaluated, the perpetrators had a diagnosis of schizophrenia (74%), depressive illnesses (16%), and personality disorder (10%). The mean ages of the victims and the perpetrators were 63 and 31 years, respectively. Nearly all the sons were living at home with their mothers, and the bedroom or kitchen was the usual locus for the murderous attack. Most of the women died of stabbings and batterings, with over two-thirds showing extreme degrees of violence. About three-quarters of the households had an absent father figure (3). It has also been proposed that the most susceptible group to matricide are young, single, socially isolated schizophrenics living with their domineering, disabled, or frail mothers (22,23). Similarly in this case, the perpetrator who was 33 years old at the time of the crime and living with her mother (the victim) in a household with an absent father figure had been diagnosed with schizophrenia 15 years earlier. The 57-year-old homicide victim was stabbed to death, decapitated, and dismembered in the bedroom of her house.

An association does appear to exist between matricide and schizophrenia, but how far the relation is causative remains unknown; simply allocating the diagnosis of schizophrenia to an individual is an incomplete and unsatisfactory explanation for this crime. The relation of schizophrenia to matricide, as distinct from other forms of family murder, might owe more to opportunity than psychodynamics. The socially disabling effects of the disease reduce the likelihood of marriage and prolong dependency on parents as it was seen in our case (5).

There is not a regulation for the act of dismembering the corpse in the Turkish Penal Code. If the act of intentional killing is committed brutally or through torment and/or against a direct ascendant, direct descendant, spouse, or sibling, the offender shall be sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment according to Article 82 of the Turkish Penal Code. However, according to Article 31, a penalty shall not be imposed on a person who, due to mental disorder, cannot comprehend the legal meaning and consequences of the act he/she has committed, or if, in respect of such act, his/her ability to control his/her own behavior was significantly diminished. Security measures shall be imposed for such persons (24). The homicide in our case was against a direct ascendant and it may be suggested that it was committed brutally but as the murderer was a schizophrenic, a penalty could not be imposed on her.

Many cases of matricide are neither predictable nor preventable, but the possibility of occurrences such as this case should be taken into account in treating schizophrenic children who lead a socially isolated existence with their mothers and have little other family support. This case highlights that swift intervention should be called for if individuals with schizophrenia have sudden changes in their mental state, delusional ideas concerning their care-giver, and threaten or carry out actual violent acts. Mothers who admit to being frightened of their children should not be ignored (5). In addition, a thorough crime scene investigation and autopsy have to be performed to resolve this rare case of homicide and dismemberment, and a psychiatric examination of the offender was completed as soon as possible after the homicide.

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