

## CASE REPORT

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# Spousal Homicide and the Subsequent Staging of a Sexual Homicide at a Distant Location

**REFERENCE:** Meloy JR. Spousal homicide and the subsequent staging of a sexual homicide at a distant location. *J Forensic Sci* 2001;47(2):395–398.

**ABSTRACT:** The case of a 63-year-old man who killed his 52-year-old wife and then staged a sexual homicide at a distant location is reported. A review of all evidence, a forensic psychological interview, and psychological testing indicated that the murder was the result of a narcissistic rage reaction during which the subject beat his wife to death with a paint can, a clothing iron, and a rock. He then drove her body to a field 87.3 miles away, and positioned it in a manner that exposed her breasts and her underwear. He turned himself into the police two days later. There is no controlled empirical research on staging, although this single case supports the criminal investigative theory that staging exists, and is done to deliberately mislead homicide investigations (Douglas et al., 1992).

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, homicide, staging, narcissism, rage

Spousal homicide is rarely sexualized (1), and sexual homicide is usually done to a stranger (2). In 1998 there were 1830 intentional killings of an intimate partner in the United States (3). That same year sexual homicides accounted for less than 1% of all homicides in the U.S. (4). These oftentimes mutually exclusive classes of homicide, both relatively unusual, could provide an excellent opportunity for staging: “when someone purposely alters the crime scene prior to the arrival of the police . . . to redirect the investigation away from the most logical suspect or to protect the victim or victim’s family” (5). This is a report of such a case involving a spousal homicide and the subsequent staging of a sexual homicide at a distant location.

### The Offense

Sixty-three-year-old Mr. A and 52-year-old Mrs. A had been married for five years. It was his third and her second union. Mr. A was retired from a civilian Navy career, and Mrs. A was looking forward to retirement from being a state law enforcement agent. Both were physically very active, enjoyed many outdoor sports together, and evidenced no physical health problems. Between them they had produced five biological offspring, who regularly visited

their home in the mountains with their grandchildren. From all appearances they were a happily married couple enjoying their middle age. There were no known financial difficulties or marital infidelities, two common sources of marital distress.

On March 27, 2000, however, things went terribly wrong. Mr. A reported after his arrest that they both had arisen about 0430 on Monday morning to prepare for Mrs. A’s work week. She would drive to her office 115 miles away and stay in an apartment until her return on Friday afternoon. This morning she asked that Mr. A put a vacuum cleaner in the back seat of her Ford Explorer to clean her apartment. Mr. A put it in the rear storage compartment instead.

Mr. A reported that Mrs. A called him a “fucking son of a bitch” when she found out where he had put it. They were in the entranceway of their home. He felt angry and shoved her. She responded by pulling a stun gun from her purse—a gift he had bought for her months earlier—and shocked his hand. He said he was “scared to death” that she would shoot him with her Glock 9 mm pistol which he mistakenly believed was also in her purse, and a life and death struggle began. Mr. A claimed that Mrs. A picked up three weapons with which to assault him: a paint can, a clothing iron, and a rock. All weapons were taken from her grip and used against her by Mr. A. The killing occurred in the utility room next to the front entrance. “All I can tell you is all of a sudden there was a weapon in my face and we both went nuts and in the process I knew she had a gun somewhere . . . it was a spontaneous thing. I mean a terrible, terrible thing.” (Police interrogation, March 29).

Shocked and disbelieving, Mr. A reported that he decided to remove her body, “because I wanted to clean the mess up” (Police interrogation). He wiped up the blood and paint, and picked up her left ear that had been dismembered by the edge of the clothing iron. His wife was very particular, and “she would have had kittens” if she saw what a mess things were (psychological evaluation). Approximately four hours later, with Mrs. A partially covered by a blue plastic bag, and the other crime scene evidence neatly bagged in plastic and placed in their second truck, Mr. A drove her to a meadow next to a work shed 87.3 miles away. He stated he dragged her body a short distance, laid her on her back, talked to her for 3–5 min, covered her with a blue blanket, and left the area.

Mr. A then proceeded to another town, bought some food, and abandoned the truck with the engine running and the doors locked. “I decided I wanted to go home” (Police interrogation).

He then returned to his house using public transportation the

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night of the killing, but observed that the police were present. He was disgusted by their jovial mood and he left. Mr. A spent the night walking to a metropolitan center 40 miles away. The next day he got a shave and a haircut, and then turned himself into the police through a local attorney. He was charged with killing his wife.

### The Evidence

The home where the killing occurred, despite its cleanliness, yielded much blood evidence that matched the victim. The paint can, clothing iron, and rock were located in the second truck parked in a cul-de-sac down the road. The rock weighed 17.4 lb. Her bloody clothing was also neatly bagged in the truck, along with her car and her purse. He had changed his wife's sweatshirt, but only tried to change her jeans. In subsequent interviews he stated they were too tight, and he could neither remove them nor completely button them again.

The autopsy indicated a pathologic diagnosis of multiple blunt force trauma of the head with secondary fracturing of the cranial vault and base of the skull; multiple blunt force trauma of the neck, left shoulder, left thigh, and left knee; and multiple blunt force trauma with abraded lacerations and sharp force injuries of the right and left hands and forearms. Cause of death was blunt force craniocerebral trauma. The body of Ms. A (see Fig. 1) was found at the disposal site two days after the killing. She was covered by a blue blanket and lying on her back. Her sweatshirt and bra were pulled up and around her neck, exposing both breasts. Her jeans were partially undone, exposing her underwear. There was no other evidence of sexual activity. It was later learned that the couple had not been sexually active for six months, and Mrs. A was likely pre-menopausal, most evident in night sweats and irritability.

The Ford Explorer was located, entered, and searched. Mrs. A's personal effects, including her badge, ID, pager, and cosmetic items, were found on the passenger floorboard. Her blood was also located in the vehicle. Her 9 mm Glock was subsequently re-

covered from her apartment, and had not been in the home that weekend. There were two other loaded pistols in the bedroom of the home.

The defense generated psychological data prior to the trial. The defense psychologist clinically interviewed the defendant and administered a number of psychological tests. She opined in her report that Mr. A had a possible alcohol abuse or dependency diagnosis and narcissistic personality traits. He was not a psychopath, however, and did not have a propensity for violence. His post-offense behavior, she believed, was caused by an acute stress reaction to the death of his wife. All data were provided to the psychologist retained by the prosecution.

Extensive interviews of witnesses by the defense, prosecution, and FBI yielded a number of important findings: there were stressors in the marriage, including Mr. A's chronic alcoholism, troubles with their respective children, conflict over the presence of firearms in the house, and what Mr. A claimed to be Mrs. A's "anger problem." Witnesses described Mrs. A as independent, resourceful, strong, not confrontational, level headed, detail oriented, and happy. A number of friends of the couple described Mr. A as very active, sociable, compliant, alcohol dependent and often intoxicated. Mrs. A's supervisor recounted that she had telephoned their home on Monday morning, worried because Mrs. A had missed an important meeting. Mr. A told this supervisor she had left hours earlier, but had some problems with vertigo over the weekend. Because of her status as a law enforcement agent, a statewide search for her began almost immediately.

A significant event was also witnessed by several individuals 15 months before the killing. During Christmas 1998, a confrontation occurred between the couple in front of their entire family concerning a bread maker. Mrs. A called Mr. A "you fucking son of a bitch," and he pushed her. He reported being very humiliated, but then left the room. They never discussed the incident. In fact, Mr. A reported that he was *never* angry, avoided all conflict, and was very compliant concerning his wife's wishes and demands, although he believed he could never live up to them.



FIG. 1—Body of homicide victim at disposal site.

Mr. A's early history was also positive for both physical and emotional abuse by his father. He would be hit with a belt and fists, and between the ages of 11–14 his father managed his son's enuresis by rubbing his son's face in his urine-soaked sheets. He reported being scared and humiliated by his father's continuous behavior, but never angry with him. Mr. A had no criminal or violent history whatsoever, and had no drug abuse history other than alcohol. There was no domestic violence in his two previous marriages, both ending due to his wives' rejection of him.

Scrutiny of the psychological test data, moreover, suggested a more detailed and relevant portrait of Mr. A than that reported by the defense psychologist. On the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-III (MCMI-III), Mr. A had a gross elevation on the narcissistic scale (BR 85), and also moderate elevations on the histrionic (BR 60) and compulsive (BR 62) scales. He also attempted to present a very positive picture of himself (Desirability BR 84). Although not a psychopath according to the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), his factor I score was 7. This factor, which has been called "aggressive narcissism" (6), placed him at the 36.5 percentile for male prison inmates (7). He was considered by the defense psychologist to have a grandiose sense of self worth, and to partially fit criteria for glibness and superficial charm, conning and manipulation, pathological lying, lack of remorse, and impulsivity. His total PCL-R score was 11; a score of  $\geq 30$  is the research convention for designating someone a psychopath (7). His IQ tested above the 95th percentile.

Although his Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) profile was subclinical across both the validity and clinical scales, he showed an important configuration on several supplementary and experimental scales (Table 1). These standardized scores suggested that Mr. A bottled up and controlled his anger, most of which he denied, and had lower self-esteem, more suspiciousness, and more submissiveness than most other individuals. Most important among these scales is his significant clinical elevation on Sc5. Caldwell (8) wrote about this scale, "both the item content and the scale overlap would be consistent with a potential for eruptions of ungovernable rage . . . a prominent elevation on this scale should be read as a serious alert to potentially dangerous outbursts" (p. 29). Friedman, Lewak, Nichols and Webb (9) further wrote, "this subscale consists of items that emphasize a fear or dread of internal disintegration or loss of control . . . the person may be vulnerable to being overwhelmed with rage affect" (p.139). The overall psychological testing suggested an individual who was friendly, sociable, and accommodating, but nevertheless pathologically narcissistic. His grandiosity was maintained in fantasy, and compensated for his low self-esteem. This inflation, however, left him prone to humiliation, which could quickly become narcissistic rage given the right circumstances and his vulnerability to the person who delivered the verbal wound. He did not consciously feel anger most of the time, was overcontrolled and denied it, and avoided any conflict, particularly with his assertive spouse,

through submissive behavior. His continual inhibition of such feeling and impulses was defective.

## Discussion

This is a case of spousal homicide caused by a narcissistic rage reaction (10). Mr. A was suddenly humiliated when his wife called him a "fucking son of a bitch," which quickly transformed into fury. He then beat her to death with weapons of opportunity he found in the laundry room: a paint can, a clothing iron, and a rock (they collected large rocks as mementos and for home design). Mrs. A's use of the stun gun in self defense, if it did occur at all, would not have happened following a mild push, given her law enforcement training in the graduated use of force in threat situations.

The emotional and cognitive template for this killing was set fifteen months earlier when the public humiliation occurred in front of his family. It is unknown if alcohol further disinhibited Mr. A, and it is possible that the killing occurred the evening before. An important predisposing factor in this case was the continuous and cruel shaming of Mr. A by his father during his early adolescence, along with his father's comments toward him that he would never measure up to his expectations. His feelings of shame, denied anger, and submissiveness toward father became a transference reaction to Mrs. A's behavior, which also conveyed to him the belief that he would never measure up to her expectations. The paradox in this case is that the complete absence of conscious anger in Mr. A, his inability to recognize and discuss his negative feelings, his lack of insight into his past, and his complete avoidance of all conflict, were important risk factors for a singular event of deregulated fury (11). Various domestic violence researchers have referred to this type of batterer as overcontrolled, negativistic, passive-aggressive, or family-only (12–14). Dutton (15) has empirically shown the causal relationship between early shaming by the father, physical abuse, and subsequent violence risk in the adult marriage.

The staging of a sexual homicide in this case is strongly suggested by the display of the body, the exposure of the breasts, the unzipped pants, the remote location of the body dumpsite, the absence of other evidence of sexual activity, the rarity of sexual homicide by intimate partners, and the confession of the husband (2,5). Douglas et al. wrote (5): "Investigators will often find forensic discrepancies when a subject stages a rape murder. The offender frequently positions the victim to infer sexual assault has occurred. An offender who has a close relationship with the victim will often only partially remove the victim's clothing (e.g., pants pulled down, shirt or dress pulled up). He rarely leaves the victim nude. Despite the body's positioning and the partial removal of clothes, the autopsy demonstrates a lack of sexual assault" (p. 255). The act of covering the body with a blanket in this case also suggests a possible offender-victim relationship, or offender remorse: both related to the psychological defense of "undoing," an unconscious atonement for a hostile feeling or aggressive act.

The abandoned truck and her personal effects may have been an attempt to suggest an abduction or "car jacking" of the victim while on her way to work. When Mr. A was confronted with these hypotheses, he "was disgusted;" he stated her breasts became exposed while dragging her, but could not explain why he didn't cover them again, especially after sitting with her and talking to her with professed sadness, guilt, grief, and affection. He attributed the killing to his fear of her Glock pistol in her purse, but could not explain why he crushed her skull rather than grab and contain her purse.

TABLE 1—*MMPI-2 Supplementary and experimental scores.*

|                                     |        |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| OH (Overcontrolled Hostility)       | T = 62 |
| ES (Ego Strength)                   | T = 40 |
| Sc5 (Defective Inhibition)          | T = 68 |
| Cyn2 (Interpersonal Suspiciousness) | T = 62 |
| LSE2 (Submissiveness)               | T = 62 |
| ANG (Anger)                         | T = 46 |

Normal Score = 50 (SD = 10); scale scores are uniformly distributed.

These latter behaviors would be more consistent with “weapon focus,” a thoroughly researched victim response to fear of a firearm (16).

There is no controlled empirical research on staging. Eke and her colleagues (A. Eke, personal communication, June, 2001) report that common motivations for staging include the desire to suggest another unknown perpetrator, a suicide, an accident, death by natural causes, or an act of self-defense. It appears that Mr. A’s post-offense behavior was initially motivated to stage a sexual homicide by a stranger, and then shifted to a self-defense claim subsequent to his arrest. He was eventually convicted of second-degree murder with a weapons enhancement and sentenced to 16 years to life in prison. As Somerset Maugham wrote in 1938, “The drama is make-believe. It does not deal with truth but with effect” (17).

#### *Acknowledgments*

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