H48 Bodies and Body Parts: When and How to Record Them During the Excavation of Mass Graves

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The goal of this presentation is to highlight the pitfalls that accompany defining differences between a "Body" and "Body Part" or "Body Portion" within a mass grave context and propose a standard method of recording such remains.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating how consistency in defining and recording human remains from a mass grave context is important not only within a single grave, but between graves and over the course of the entire investigation. Inconsistent definitions and recording during excavation will lead to problems during mortuary examination. Mission planners should carefully consider their systems of recording prior to any operational activity.

Human remains within a mass grave context, especially secondary depositions, are regularly recovered in a disarticulated state. Care in exposing and removal of remains from a grave by an observant excavator, knowledgeable in human skeletal anatomy, is one of the most important steps in limiting (and hopefully eliminating) further disarticulation. Another important step, though often disregarded, is the consistent classifying and subsequent recording of disarticulated remains. Inconsistencies in defining incomplete portions of body could have an adverse effect on mortuary operations.

When dealing with large numbers of remains the order of autopsy typically takes into consideration the types of remains to be examined. Complete bodies are regularly processed first while incomplete bodies are examined later with an eye towards reassociation of disarticulated body portions. With hundreds (or thousands) of remains waiting to be processed, a decision may be made to bypass or delay examination of disarticulated body parts in an effort to streamline autopsy time, money, and energy, or to produce more identifications in the beginning while allowing reassociation activities to take a back seat. While not all mortuaries may operate in this manner, most will use the recovery/evidence log to set the basic order of remains examination. The classification of remains at the time of recovery may thus dictate the order of mortuary examination. Consistency in the classification of recovered remains therefore becomes an important issue.

In addition, consistent classification of remains is necessary to assist with reassociation of disarticulated remains. When dealing with hundreds to thousands of remains an ordered method of categorizing them is needed to ensure that an organized approach to reassociation is maintained. Methods such as spatial analysis of recovery location data, which relies on database queries, would be limited when recovered remains are recorded inconsistently.

While classifying and recording of recovered remains may seem straightforward, the fact is, defining what constitutes a body as opposed to a portion of body is problematic. Recovered remains are regularly classified as a "Body" or "Body Part" (sometimes with additions of "General Bone/General Body Part" to identify single disarticulated bones). Unfortunately there appears to be no agreed upon classification system regarding what constitutes a "Body" as opposed to a "Body Part." If a complete body is to be classified and then recorded in the evidence log as a "Body," what do you classify a body missing an arm? Should it still be recorded as a "Body"? What if it is missing two arms, its head, and a portion of its upper torso? As a body becomes more disarticulated, at what point should the terminology be changed from "Body" to "Body Part"? It is often left up to the individual doing the recovery, guided by past experience and loose, sometimes changing definitions, which decides how the set of remains they are exposing are classified. What might constitute a "Body" for one recovery team member may be a "Body Part" to another.

Complicating the discrepancies between individuals defining the remains is the timeframe over which large investigations take place. ICTY- type post-conflict missions regularly rotate personnel during a single season, excavate several graves during that season, and continue performing in this manner for several years. Inconsistent recording between individuals, different teams working different sites, and over several months/years accumulate causing large discrepancies within the reporting.

This presentation will introduce a comprehensive classification system for use during recovery operations. While this system may not fit all mission situations, it is presented as an example of such a system mission planners should be considering prior to the start of an investigation.

Consistent classification of remains over the entire length of an investigation, especially if such investigations will take months or years to complete, is essential. Mission planners should seriously consider the methods that they will be employing in the mortuary and how recovery classifications can affect their plan. Integrating a consistent recovery classification system with mortuary operations will help

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to more accurately organize examination schedules (and thus streamline autopsy time, cost, and energy) and maximize available recovery observations and data for mortuary analysis.

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