H33 An Historical Perspective on Nonmetric Skeletal Variation: Hooton and the Harvard List

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn the historical perspective on Earnest Hooton's research on nonmetric morphological variants as indicators of ancestry.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating increased awareness of the development of nonmetric trait analysis within forensic anthropology.

Earnest A. Hooton (1887 – 1954) was perhaps the most influential physical anthropologist among early researchers interested in the field of race and race studies. Hooton single-handedly trained most of the dominant contributors to the study of race. During his tenure at Harvard University, beginning in 1913, and ending with his death in 1954, he displayed an active interest in all things racial. The focus of this presentation is his research detailing the nonmetric morphological variants he prescribed as useful indicators of racial affinity.

Hooton believed it was possible to find non-adaptive morphological variants capable of differentiating the various 'races' of man and that morphological features were of greater anthropological significance than diameters and indices. In lecture notes obtained from the Peabody Museum, Hooton expresses his views concerning the advantages and disadvantages of morphological (as opposed to metric) observations as racial criteria. Advantages of anthroposcopy and morphological traits according to Hooton are: "1) [They] spring to the eye, [and are] qualitative as well as quantitative; 2) [They are] dependent upon form difference rather [than] size, [or] proportions; and 3) [Are] more certainly heritable." The only disadvantage of morphological treatment, according to Hooton, was that many of the traits are incapable of metric treatment. Hooton, whose list of students represents a Who's Who of later race/ancestry researchers, passed on to his students traits he deemed diagnostic of race. They are not referenced to a particular study by Hooton; rather, they represent his legacy as a teacher. These traits, and their perceived value in ancestry determination, have continued to be passed on from mentor to student, almost unchanged to the present day. Despite their widespread use, actual frequencies in more modern populations have only recently been adequately assessed.

To facilitate data collection, Hooton began to develop the forms and standard descriptions known as the Harvard List. The List has changed little since the time Hooton was recording data. Although no one knows for sure how many anthropologists use similar versions of the List, it is reasonable to assume that a majority of Hooton's students used or borrowed from it when establishing their own laboratory protocols for data collection. Hooton believed that "methods and methodology [were] the very vitals of any study and should be kept up to date and in the forefront of ones thinking." In an unpublished manuscript, Hooton tests the Harvard List on five of his former students – Coon, Angel, Birdsell, Lasker, and Newman – to assess their ability to score nonmetric variants without standard illustrations. This preliminary test failed miserably, with the observers in agreement in only 18.7% of the cases. These formative tests pointed out a shortcoming of the List – a lack of standardized scales for observation. Unfortunately, the Hooton archives do not include the second trial of these five participants utilizing standard scales, so it will never be known whether the scales would have helped, or whether Hooton was satisfied with the use of the Harvard List by subsequent researchers. Despite his awareness of this shortcoming and his attempts to resolve the issue, the lack of standardized descriptions of morphological variants continues to present a serious obstacle to accurate and consistent ancestry determination by modern physical anthropologists.

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