



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H43 Forensic Anthropology and the Belief in Human Races

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This paper will present the view that races are cultural constructs not biological entities; and that migration patterns and historical events are largely responsible for the emergence and persistence of current, unscientific notions of human race.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating by exploring the notion that races or subspecies of humans do not exist; that there is no scientific justification for human races; and that current views of race or human subspecies are the result of historical events including non-random human migration patterns.

Leonard Lieberman has documented a steady decline in references to race in anthropological journals and an increasing rejection of the concept of race by physical anthropologists. Despite his findings the traditional belief that humanity is divisible into 3 or 4 major groups with some kind of biological meaning appears to be alive and well among some forensic anthropologists. Certainly, a significant number take the view that human variation is gradual over space and that human races have no foundation in biology. There are probably fewer people that take intermediate views than one might imagine. In this paper, two aspects of the race debate will be examined: 1) recent thinking about the scientific bases for human races, and 2) the seeming reality of race in America.

It is well known that the current concept of the 4 major races stems from the 18th century writings of Linnaeus and Blumenbach. Writing a century before Darwin and Mendel and 200 years before the development of modern genetics, Linnaeus knew nothing about evolutionary theory or the nature of the human genome and very little about human variation. Nonetheless, his ideas persist virtually unchanged.

The race concept need not be an issue of belief. It should be an issue of science. Unlike religious tenets, the existence of human races is testable. Formal definitions of race and subspecies have been debated, the distribution of genes in human populations is becoming better understood and population histories and lineages are being reconstructed. Alan Templeton (2002) explicates the problem of human races by exploring exactly what races are and how humans fit into the model. Templeton points out that there are two definitions of race customarily applied to plant and animal species. Races are either "geographically circumscribed, genetically differentiated populations," or "distinct evolutionary lineages within species." Then he systematically applies data on human genetic diversity to demonstrate how human populations satisfy neither definition. There is no scientific justification for the existence of races in our species, in fact to the contrary, modern molecular genetic data demonstrate quite clearly that human races do not exist.

Why then is the concept of race so compelling to a group of modern forensic anthropologists? The answer lies in large part to human migrations. It is often assumed that if races ever were a reality for human populations, the concept has been blurred in recent centuries by human migration. Borrowing from the sociocultural concept of the ethnographic present, the author of one text has coined the term the heterographic present referring to the past when human populations were in areas of the world inhabited by their ancestors. It might seem like the massive migrations of the past several centuries have mixed up otherwise stable populations and races that represent the true nature of human diversity. Actually, the opposite is true. Human migrations are a significant contributor to the emergence and persistence of the race concept.

Before people began to move about in large numbers, human variation was gradual in space. There is no evidence to the contrary. Of course, there were differences between local populations, to a greater or lesser degree depending on isolating mechanisms and gene flow. Native Australians and Tasmanians were isolated by water, the Amish by religious and ethnic views. However, more than anything else, differences between groups reflected geographic distance.

When early European explorers encountered peoples of Africa and Asia, often by ship, they saw individuals at the extremes of their distribution (West and Southern Africa, East Asia) not the myriad, gradually varying populations in between. Likewise, the post Columbian peopling of the Americas reflects mainly selective migrations from Western Europe, West Africa and the Far East. It is the juxtaposition of people from widely separated parts of the world that emphasizes biological differences and creates the illusion of discrete groups or races. In different parts of the world with different migration histories, races (or something like them) are perceived, but they are different.

There needs to be a clearer understanding of the nature of human diversity. An understanding based not on belief, but on scientific evidence. The formal application of modern genetic data to taxonomic rules governing subspecies illustrates that there is no valid justification for a subspecific taxon in the species *Homo sapiens*. This paper argues that the dominant notion of human races in the U.S. is the result of a unique population history and a non-critical acceptance of 18th preDarwinian notions about the nature of human diversity.

Forensic Anthropology, Race, Scientific Justification