



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H44 The Deconstruction of Race: Its Origins and Existence

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This paper describes some aspects of the 'race debate' among forensic anthropologists and how it applies to their practices.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating an understanding of the historical context of race, its progression into popular convention, and its use and practice in forensic anthropology.

Perhaps the greatest reigning debate among forensic anthropologists is the concept of whether 'race' truly exists. This important question has spurred many intelligent debates, and provided many noteworthy perceptions from each side. However, a common conclusion has yet to be reached.

The term race appeared in the eighteenth centuries, especially in the literature by Linnaeus and Blumenbach. However, their distinctions and divisions among the human species would undoubtedly be characterized as strongly racist in today's scientific societies as they were based on an exaggerated amplification of physical traits, moral characteristics, overall temperament, and political behavior. A later theory by Darwin was based on the natural selection idea that man had evolved from an apelike ancestral form. He believed that since there are no white apes, the white race was more civilized than the dark races, which he thought to be closer to their nonhuman ancestors. This explanation of human associations became widely accepted in both scientific circles and in popular convention.

In 1951, a group of fourteen physical anthropologists and geneticists came to a unanimous agreement on a common definition of race. However, this definition must not have sufficed for many physical anthropologists because the debate of the existence of race caused a significant uproar during the 1960s, with the attack on the concept of race being led by Montagu, Livingstone, and Brace and its defense by Dobzhansky and Coon and Garn. During the 1970s, those authors of physical anthropology textbooks with a strong oppositional opinion of the race concept openly expressed their opinions in their text. Based on the large number of these authors supporting the notion that race does not exist, it seems that there is an indication of a decline in support for classifications of race. In 1993, physical anthropologists at the American Association of Physical Anthropologists pushed for a modification of the UNESCO statement on race. However, since anthropologists do not agree on the existence of race, their amendment was defeated.

It seems that most of the 'great race debate' centers on the relevance of the actual term 'race' and the connotations derived from its use. Thus, part of the disagreement on race is attributable to the lack of consensus on its definition and use in scientific analyses. Some alternative suggestions for the replacement of the word 'race' have included terms such as genogroup, population, ethnic group, and ancestry. In addition, many scientists are unclear on the origins of the term 'race' and its progressive use among scientific communities. Since the definition of race cannot be agreed upon, it seems that the focus has evolved as to whether or not race exists as a biological reality among human populations and if it can, therefore, be correctly determined by forensic anthropologists. While many physical anthropologists and scientists believe that race does not exist, how is it that the race myth persists in popular convention? How can forensic anthropologists determine race for a biological profile if it does not exist? This presentation serves to further examine the historical context of race, its progression into popular convention, and its use and practice in forensic anthropology.

Race, Ethnicity, Ancestry