H45 Race vs. Ancestry: A Necessary Distinction

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This paper presents a historical and archaeological perspective on the development of racial classifications as they have been applied to forensic anthropological analysis.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating a critical assessment of race, a difficult concept that is used in our analyses of skeletal material.

Development of a biological profile, which includes sex, age, and ancestry, is a basic component of the anthropological assessment for forensic purposes. The use of racial classifications in issues of personal identification is often critical to narrowing the search parameters. While the error factors for correct estimation of age and sex determination are relatively straight-forward, the quantification of "correct" assessment of ancestry is less clear. Although it is possible to scientifically quantify and describe human biological variation, linking this variation to socially recognized racial categories is problematic. Two primary areas of concern can be distinguished. First, the social categories themselves have changed and continue to change. Self-identification entails many factors other than direct ancestry and often varies by the context in which the identification is made. Identification by other parties may be based on limited knowledge of ancestry and incorporate assumptions about descent that have little foundation in reality.

The second area from which difficulties arise concerns the basis upon which the assessments themselves are based. The skeletal material from which we take measurements and test hypotheses regarding ancestry was collected during a time when nonscientific definitions of biological race were prevalent. The exact ancestry was often not known for the individuals in our major collections, and racial classifications were assigned based on soft tissue morphology. Some skeletal collections were even amassed for racist purposes by anatomists and anthropologists trying to correlate anatomical variation with social superiority or inferiority. The historical record, however, shows that European, African, and Asian ancestral groups mixed rapidly after arriving in America. Examination of the archaeological record, as well as recent studies of genetic relatedness, show that while people may still have been identified as belonging to one "race," their ancestry often reflected many different sources.

In this presentation, information from a series of historic archaeological sites is utilized to show how the issues of identity and ancestry became confounded during the historical period. Issues of class, community, and access to resources become as important for establishing "race" in the social context as the actual ancestry. Biological and nonbiological definitions of race and ancestry are considered and a discussion of how social conceptions of race have shaped our discussions of biological variation is offered. The implications to those who practice forensic anthropology are also addressed. When combined with the current understanding of the biological definition of "race" and the uncertain empirical basis, the confusion between race and ancestry is highlighted.

Biological races of humans do not exist, regardless of the social categories, if we stand by the biological definition of race as a subspecies or variant. Therefore we may be attempting to scientifically sort phenotypic variation by studying groups socially classified within recent history. These socially classified groups may have shared equally in racial prejudice and socioeconomic discrimination but less substantially in ancestry. It is therefore timely to reconsider the nature of the variation we are attempting to quantify, both for forensic purposes and for skeletal biological studies of health and nutritional status among historic skeletal populations.

Race, Ancestry, Biological Profile

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