



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2008

### H99 Deconstructing or Perpetuating Race: The Status of Race in Forensic Anthropology

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain an understanding and increased awareness of the trends relating to the acceptance of the concept of race portrayed in textbooks and *Journal of Forensic Sciences* articles in the field of forensic anthropology over the past 35 to 45 years.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and humanity by demonstrating the important role that the social construct of race has played in this scientific field. Through the literature presented, trends in the acceptance and non-acceptance of race will be examined and exemplified to give insight as to how the discrete categories of race are used today and have been used since 1960.

Physical characteristics and human variation, as often studied by forensic anthropologists, have resulted in defining differences between people as "race." The misconceptions that arose with such an explanation of physical differences have augmented the tremulous and malevolent past of the concept of race.

The goal of this study is to examine the views of race that have been presented in the forensic anthropology literature and to extrapolate any trends from the opinions expressed by the authors. While the pattern of the acceptance of race in physical anthropology is never clearly defined, others have reported a decline in non-forensics journals. A similar decline in the acceptance of the existence of biological race as a valid description in forensic anthropology may be expected, although due to the utility of "race" in skeletal analysis, this trend is apt to be more gradual and not as pervasive.

This study aimed to identify sections of forensic anthropology and/or human osteology textbooks and *Journal of Forensic Sciences* articles primarily concerned with race or human variation. Thirty-four textbooks published between 1962 and 2007 were examined, and 26 *Journal of Forensic Sciences* articles were selected from between 1972 and 2007. The author's view presented in each of these texts was then classified as: (1) races do not exist, (2) races do exist, (3) author noncommittal, (4) race not mentioned, and (5) race accepted, but the author's view was not explicitly stated.

Results from the textbooks and the articles indicate a gradual decline in the acceptance of race in the field of forensic anthropology over the past 35 to 45 years. Changes in the authors' views were noted in both the manner in which race was discussed and the terminology used to describe such human variation. While there was no one span of years identified as a time of drastic change in regard to race, terminology employed by the authors demonstrated a shift to terms other than "race" as early as 1988 in textbooks and as late as 1995 in the journal articles. Overall, throughout the time period examined, there was an increase in "races do not exist," and decreases in both "races do exist" and "race accepted."

In conclusion, these results suggest that a gradual transition is occurring between the view of races existing to the view of races not existing. Forensic anthropology is a subset of physical anthropology but perhaps even more intertwined with the concept of race, because forensic anthropologists continue to struggle with appropriate terms for communicating with law enforcement personnel and the public. **Race, Trends, Terminology**