H59   Sociocultural Factors in the Identification of Undocumented Migrants

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The goal of this presentation is to discuss the accuracy and utility of the "cultural profile" concept proposed by Birkby et al. (2008) from the cross-disciplinary perspective of a forensic anthropologist and a cultural anthropologist.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by proposing a precise language with which to discuss non-biological evidence utilized in forensic examinations of believed-to-be migrants from Mexico and Central America, a demographic that is steadily increasing within medico-legal jurisdictions throughout the United States. This presentation also aims to open a discussion within the forensic science community about the ways that regionally specific cultural information can be useful in death investigations, especially when antemortem data is incomplete or limited.

Since 2001, the Arizona-Sonora portion of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands has seen a massive increase in the number of migrants dying in the desert while attempting to cross the border clandestinely. Since then, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) has relied on non-biological evidence alongside biological evidence to aid in the identification of human remains.

The unique situation on the U.S.-Mexico border poses particular challenges to forensic science. Because migrants are seeking to avoid detection, many are found in remote desert areas without identification media. Due to economics, fear, and the international nature of the migration issue, the acquisition of missing person's reports is often delayed, and when missing person's reports are filed, they rarely include dental or medical records. Undocumented Border Crossers (UBCs) are a regionally diverse yet socially distinct category–they are defined not by shared ancestry, nationality, or ethnicity, but by the *act* of crossing the border. Although most UBCs identified at the PCOME have come from Mexico or Central America, this is a region too large to be unified into a category with homogeneous biological (or cultural) traits (Spradley, 2008 and Hefner, 2008).

To respond to these challenges, the PCOME created a profile for UBCs in order to categorize unidentified human remains as either probable migrants or probable U.S. citizens. This was done so that: (a) the proper pool of antemortem records could be compared; and, (b) deceased migrants could be better counted (Anderson 2008). A significant part of the determination of a UBC relies on what Birkby et al. termed the "cultural profile," referring to "the geographic context of recovery, personal effects, dental health, and cultural accoutrements" (2008). In the current paper, the authors expand on the notion of a cultural profile, arguing for use of the term "sociocultural" instead of "cultural" to better indicate the economic nature of much of this evidence. Additionally, a description is provided of the methods used at PCOME to assess the sociocultural profile, and consider the potential for more specific predictive categorizing based on regionally specific insights from a cultural anthropological approach to modern material culture.

Migration, Material Evidence, Anthropology