



Physical Anthropology Section – 2011

H64 Forensic Interviews: Corroborating Evidence and Collecting Data for Anthropological Field Work

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn which forensic interviewing techniques can be applied by anthropologists who are interviewing international populations in anticipation of field excavation. The same techniques can also be considered by investigators in the United States who are reviewing cold case homicides and missing person investigations involving immigrant and migrant populations.

The presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the validity of memory recall from survivors or witnesses of genocide, massacre, torture, murder, and other acts of violent crime after an extended period of time has elapsed. This presentation will examine techniques for developing a forensic interview strategy when approaching witnesses and survivors of violent crimes and international atrocities.

From November of 2008 through July of 2010, investigators from the University of South Florida conducted interviews with Nigerians who survived or witnessed a massacre that occurred in Asaba, Nigeria on October 7, 1967. The process of creating an oral record began with a review of the known literature and the development of an interview strategy. The interviewers established a general interview protocol that was used to establish the witness' *role* during the event, ascertain specific information that could assist with a field excavation, and open a forum that offered the interviewees the opportunity to recount their experience. The research team conducted more than 40 interviews for this project and these interviews were used for the analysis presented in this research paper.

This paper will address the benefits of conducting a directed, goal oriented interview that also allows interviewees the opportunity of tell their stories (in the oral tradition). This technique allows for the broadest opportunity to gather information and identify evidence. Investigators who attempt to gather *legal truth* from events which have occurred in the past are faced with the challenge of corroboration and will be limited by the existence of evidence. These types of forensic interviews are a starting point for the anthropologists who are searching for physical evidence, or it can be used by law enforcement to corroborate physical evidence.

Interviewing survivors or witnesses to genocide, massacre, torture or other acts of violent crime presents specific problems of memory recollection, legal reliability, and/or credibility. The role of anthropologists in these types of investigations is more varied than in typical American casework. Therefore, the ability of anthropologists, pathologists, and investigators to successfully interview family members and survivors is critical to successfully completing the mission.

Each interview for the Asaba project was developed in a unique manner and the interviewers were required to direct the process so the established interview goals were met, while not interfering with the natural process of the interview. The interviewers were also required to connect the common points of each interview (in real time) and to address any points of discrepancy between the interviews.

The investigators who are developing a forensic interview strategy must consider the following factors before they consider the validity of episodic memory: the elapsed amount of time between the event and the interview, the psychological effects of trauma, the potential of outside influence upon the memory, cultural perspectives of the interviewees, the age of the interviewee at the time of the event and the time of the interview, and any other hidden agendas brought to the interview process. The investigators and anthropologists have to understand that information (or evidence) provided these witnesses has the greatest potential for being unreliable and this presents very specific challenges to the interviewer. This challenge is the purpose for creating a defined forensic interview strategy.

The paper will also address the methodology for documentation of the data, including the creation of missing person(s) questionnaire and victim databases, and the best practice standards for obtaining, sharing, and analyzing such data.

The initial results from this interview project suggest that the forensic interview strategy did establish the reliability of the witness, corroborated known facts, and directed the anthropologists with the field excavation plan.

Interview, Massacre, Cold Case