



Anthropology Section - 2015

A121 Arrows of Influence: The Return Flow of Theory and Method to the Parent Disciplines of Modern Forensic Anthropology

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the relationships between the theoretical and methodological foundations of forensic anthropology and those of disciplines which have influenced forensic anthropology historically.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by stimulating an examination of the evolving relationships between forensic anthropology and its parent disciplines with regard to low-, middle-, and high-level theory. A dialectic “back flow” or return of information and influence is proposed.

Situations in which dominant cultures come into contact with subordinate cultures produce what has been called “contact shock.” This is the overwhelming cultural influence of the dominant culture upon the subordinate culture which may settle over time into a more balanced exchange. Similarly, as forensic anthropology evolved over the last century, it was heavily influenced by other disciplines and may now be reaching a new era in its development, as a more equitable state of exchange with these disciplines appears to be forthcoming. Exponential change in forensic anthropology has come about in recent decades; the contextual framework, perception, and practice of the field have developed under the influence of theoretical and methodological constructs derived from biological sciences, archaeology, geophysics, criminalistics, and molecular biology, among others. This study considers both current and future aspects of informational, theoretical, and methodological “back flow” from contemporary forensic anthropology to several of the disciplines from which it borrowed and adapted theory or methodology in forming a cohesive, evolving discipline.

It will be argued that, as the discipline develops, theories can be offered back to the original disciplines as a means of addressing old questions in new ways. This can be accomplished by linking current and past behaviors via similarities their signatures leave in the environment. Examples of topics from other disciplines to which forensic anthropology can contribute new understanding include: (1) the interpretation of site formation processes in the archaeological record; (2) the interpretation and understanding of sub-surface geophysical signatures and their formative components; (3) the development of systematic training and evaluation of human remains detection dog search methodologies and their potential utility and limitations for archaeological prospection; (4) socio-cultural insights into aberrant behaviors such as homicide, war crimes, and genocide where participants and witnesses are no longer alive; and, (5) studies of modern human variation and their implications for biological anthropology and bio-archaeology. These areas of “back flow influence” have the potential to significantly contribute to new theoretical and methodological approaches to many disciplines that have been important in the development of forensic anthropology. These areas should be fostered by forensic anthropology practitioners as is appropriate to this holistic and dynamic field.

Theory, Archaeology, Method