A36 The Social Side of Human Identification

Robin C. Reineke, PhD, University of Arizona, 1009 E South Campus Drive, Tucson, AZ 85721*

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how context-specific sociocultural anthropological expertise can support and enhance the applied work of human identification, especially in violent or post-conflict settings. Focused as it is on social worlds and local contexts, sociocultural anthropology can provide a bridging or mediating role between forensic practitioners and local communities.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing evidence and examples of effective collaboration between forensic practitioners and sociocultural anthropologists in the realm of human identification.

Observations and data used in this presentation come from more than nine years of applied forensic work and research among forensic practitioners at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) and families of missing and deceased migrants along the United States-Mexico border. Data are drawn from the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, as well as from interviews with forensic scientists, law enforcement, border patrol agents, non-profit family advocates, and the families of missing and deceased migrants.

This presentation is focused on a specific set of findings, namely that forensic identification processes that fail to take into account political, cultural, and social contexts are not only less effective but may actually cause harm. As victims of violence are often structurally vulnerable, care must be taken so that forensic investigations are undertaken with an awareness of the political context and translated with cultural sensitivity.[1] Without efforts to integrate the family and community into the process, forensic identifications can become medicalized, reproducing violent structures enforced by those in power and disenfranchising the healing process that drives so many forensic practitioners to do the work they do. Medicalization is the process whereby normal human conditions become problems for medical professionals in a manner that often has long-term negative social health consequences.[2] In this presentation, the concept of medicalization is applied to examine forensic practices of human identification: can forensic investigations, especially in violent contexts, serve to medicalize grief in a way that exacerbates the trauma and suffering of affected communities?

Results of long-term participant observation reveal that forensic identifications can indeed cause additional suffering and trauma for families, especially if the identification and notification process is conducted with an approach that is not sensitive to community context and history. Some of the best models for avoiding these problems involve collaboration between sociocultural anthropologists and forensic anthropologists in international human rights (post-conflict) settings. Research for this presentation reveals that there are needs, as well as precedent, for such collaborative approaches within the United States domestic context.

The PCOME is one of the first offices in the nation to integrate local knowledge in a meaningful and sustained manner. By working with social scientists and community advocates, forensic practitioners at the PCOME have been able to revise and improve protocols so they align more closely with family and community needs.[3] The PCOME works closely with the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, a family advocacy organization founded by cultural anthropologists. Colibrí manages an antemortem database relevant to missing migrants and communicates directly with families throughout intake, investigation, and case resolution. Colibrí attends to the social side of identification, which includes explaining all aspects of the investigation to families, fielding their questions, and offering supportive advocacy grounded in a place of understanding and respect for the family's needs. The results of this collaboration include more than 100 successful identifications. Partnerships such as that between the PCOME and Colibrí model a best practice where efforts are made to link the "affective identification" made by families with the scientific identification made by forensic practitioners.[4]

The scientific process of human identification cannot be entirely separated from the social context in which it operates. If the family does not trust, understand, or have a stake in the work of forensic practitioners, positive identifications will do nothing to assist families and communities in healing. There is an entire other side to the identification process that is critical — the social side of identification. If the social side is not connected to the scientific side of identification, forensic work can become imposed on communities in harmful ways. Collaboration between forensic practitioners and sociocultural anthropologists is offered as a step forward in both international and domestic contexts.

*Presenting Author

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