



## Anthropology Section - 2016

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### A37 **Family Opposition to Human Rights Exhumations: The Need for Interdisciplinary Research on a Question of Science, Politics, and Consent**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how ethnographic, historical, and political science research can clarify the reasons why some family members have opposed the exhumation of mass graves and identification of missing persons, even in cases in which those efforts are framed as “transitional justice” work and fueled to a great extent by concern for the needs of these very families.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by addressing a topic that some experts allege “has been largely, shamefully avoided in forensic anthropology literature”: the objections of a key group of stakeholders, families of the missing, to the exhumation and identification of their dead.<sup>1</sup> It is a crucial topic because of the ways in which it pits three priorities widely acknowledged as important — the creation of an objective historical record, the collection of evidence, and the needs of families of the missing — against one another.<sup>2</sup> On the occasion of the 2014 decision to change the name of the Physical Anthropology Section to “Anthropology” and the 2015 opening of the AAFS Humanitarian and Human Rights Resource Center, this presentation illustrates a crucial area in which new interdisciplinary connections can be made between the practical challenges of forensic science in the human rights context and emerging sociocultural studies of the needs of families of the missing in post-conflict regions.

Based on eight years of research, including archival research in two languages and interviews with forensic anthropologists, human rights activists, and religious leaders, this presentation identifies two broad categories of objections to post-conflict exhumations: religious and political; however, in this process, it argues for a nuanced understanding of the connections between the two: religious objections can serve political purposes and political objections can be infused with notions of the sacred.

While cultural and religious objections to both exhumation and autopsy can impact death investigation in any context, these objections are particularly complex in post-conflict areas in which forensic science comes to be seen not only as mechanism for medicolegal truth, but also as a “technology of repair” and of memory for divided societies.<sup>3,4</sup> In Poland and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, forensic anthropologists have faced not only religious prohibitions against exhumation, but also complex questions about the extent to which the religious leaders and community members who were making these objections spoke for the interests of all families of the missing or for all survivors of violence. As they made decisions about whether and how to proceed with exhumation efforts, they were hampered by a lack of supporting sociocultural research into the political pressures that informed these religious objections and other questions of power and representation in these communities.<sup>5</sup>

Other types of objections, more political in thrust, are unique to the circumstances of human rights and transitional justice — particularly because of the ways in which human rights violations organize networks of victims and systematize their claims.<sup>6</sup> The first and still best-known mobilization against forensic investigations into human rights violations occurred in Argentina, starting in the mid-1980s, when Clyde Snow and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team began exhuming the graves of “disappeared” victims of right-wing political repression. The anthropologists faced protests from Argentina’s most famous group of human rights activists, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, who demanded that legal accountability for the perpetrators of violations be prioritized before any form of identification, mourning, or “closure.”<sup>7</sup> The Madres’ organizing slogan, “Aparición con vida” (“Let the disappeared alive”) lent the appearance of irrationality to a group of activists whose family members were, except for a few extraordinary cases, almost certainly dead.<sup>8</sup>

This presentation joins other scholars in finding it unacceptable to dismiss anti-exhumation sentiment — religious or political — as the irrational demands of “superstitious” cultures or of people traumatized by grief.<sup>9,10</sup> It calls for both data-sharing across context and sociocultural analysis of the widespread phenomenon of these objections in order to promote informed critical engagement. The reasons for family members’ views on exhumation are multi-dimensional — political, moral, historical, and sometimes scientific — and often contain both important insights and misrepresentations. Only through both comparative and deeply contextual understandings can forensic anthropologists be adequately prepared for principled negotiation of this important challenge.



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### Human Rights, Families, Anti-Exhumation