



A67 The Birkby Paradox — Forensic Anthropology Participation and Gender

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the critical nature of support for diversity by gender in training programs in forensic anthropology and the current status of such diversity.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by considering the current situation and discussing what levels of support are needed for the future in training and developing forensic anthropologists.

Walter H. Birkby was a superb osteologist and an excellent teacher, was dedicated to forensic anthropology, and possessed a great instinct for legal context. He and his program produced many students, both male and female; however, there was also a negative side. His laboratory featured pictures of women no longer considered acceptable and, from the perspective of his female students, his relationship with male and female students differed. He favored his male students in support, but he also gave rein to the women in his program, allowing us to move forward. His laboratory trained a significant number of female graduate students.

Women used a variety of strategies to survive and succeed: (1) alliances and support networks; (2) finding funding outside of Walt's laboratory and outside employment both factored into completion; (3) taking on the challenges; and, (4) focusing on the issues.

From the 1970s through 1990s, the Birkby laboratory epitomized the transitions in the discipline. The remainder of this presentation reviews the changes in participation by gender in forensic anthropology. Material is drawn from publicly available sites. Unfortunately, a binary separation into two genders had to be used, ignoring gender fluidity and those who may be gender queer.

Forensic science and forensic anthropology developed slowly, with the American Academy of Forensic Sciences being founded in 1948. Largely male for many decades, women were present and active, however, it was not until 1979 that a female served as president.

The Anthropology section has seen a steady growth of women. Membership lists as of 2016 show women at the Student Affiliate and Trainee Affiliate levels outnumber men by a 4:1 margin. At the Associate Member level, women outnumber men by almost 3:1. The margins are more balanced at Member level (3:2) but only reach equivalency at the level of Fellow.

At the Member and Fellow ranks, the numbers of men and women with doctorates are approximately the same; at the Associate Member level, the numbers are notably different with more women having a Master's degree (46.8%) than men (16.1%). There are suggestions that a number of women have found productive careers in forensic laboratories and coroners' offices with a Master's degree and have remained at that level for years.

The American Board of Forensic Anthropology has seen a similar transformation in the numbers of women. Begun by men in 1977, the Board gradually added a few females. Over the next two decades, the percentage of women gradually rose from 20% to more than 30%. Currently, the number of active male and female diplomates is approximately equal, having seen a noticeable upswing in the past few years.

Forensic anthropology has paralleled the trend of increasing the numbers of women in the forensic sciences. Universities report that forensic sciences program enrollments are 74%-90% female. Houck noted that forensic sciences constitute a marked departure from the gender gap in most of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and



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Math (STEM) fields.¹ There are many suggestions as to why this has occurred, including strong role models in popular media and a commitment to public service.

What is left of the “glass ceiling” is in leadership and in the pipeline to it. Women are common in state crime laboratories at the bench and leadership levels, they are rarely directors of the larger federal laboratories.

The increase in women in forensic sciences, and in forensic anthropology in particular, began in the mid-1980s, at the time that Walter Birkby and many of his generation of professors were at the height of their programmatic careers. Despite the often noticeable discrepancies in how they supported female students, they encouraged their entry into the field and provided opportunities for these women to gain field experience.

Reference(s):

1. Houck M.M. Is forensic science a gateway for women in science? *Forensic Sci Policy Manage.* 2009;1(1):65-69.

Career Development, Gender Diversity, Birkby