



A145 Perspectives on Diversity in Skeletal Collections

Allysha P. Winburn, PhD, University of West Florida, Pensacola, FL 32514; Antaya L. Jennings, BA*, Pensacola, FL; Dawnie W. Steadman, PhD, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996; Elizabeth A. DiGangi, PhD, Department of Anthropology, Binghamton, NY 13902*

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the many complex factors influencing living individuals' willingness to donate their remains for forensic scientific study. For communities of color, factors may include prioritizing justice for the living over study of the dead, informed by cross-generational, community-level memories of historic scientific misuses of human remains.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by portraying perspectives that are infrequently represented in forensic science research: those of living donors from communities of color.

The development, testing, and refinement of forensic anthropology methods are contingent on the analysis of donated skeletal collections representing documented individuals from various ancestral backgrounds. In the United States, forensic anthropologists must have an adequate understanding of modern United States skeletal variation to construct the biological profiles that enable personal identifications. However, the few existing United States collections of donated, fully documented skeletons do not currently reflect modern United States ancestral demography. Specifically, European American individuals are overrepresented in these collections, while African American, Asian American, Native American, and Hispanic individuals are underrepresented. Further, where the remains of people of color are present in fully documented collections, they may represent medical examiner donations whereby families were unable or unwilling to claim the remains. From a collections perspective, such donations suffer from the lack of documentation other than sex, ancestry, and perhaps age. While medical examiners can legally consent to donation, families may or may not have been told that donation was the final disposition, rather than burial or cremation. Therefore, some institutions have eliminated this practice (e.g., the University of Tennessee's Forensic Anthropology Center).

In line with the above, there are ethical considerations when analyzing remains of individuals who may not have explicitly consented to the use of their remains in this fashion. While consent standards followed by Institutional Review Boards do not include research on the deceased, this does not mean that handling another individual's remains is without ethical concerns. Different cultures and individuals have varying perspectives on what happens after death; some may believe that the remains themselves can be harmful to researchers, or they may simply desire that their bones be left alone to decay as nature intended. While practitioners have a desire for diverse collections, balance must be achieved with the beliefs and customs of the people who are most underrepresented in these samples.

From the forensic anthropological perspective, ancestral disparities in skeletal collections are a scientific shortcoming to be resolved. Practitioners know that in absence of diverse, documented skeletal collections on which to base their methods, their understanding of modern United States skeletal variation will suffer, and correct identifications may decrease. However, for people of color considering whether to donate their remains, the issue is more complicated. Past biological anthropologists had a long history of building scientific knowledge quite literally on the backs of non-consenting Native Americans, African Americans, and other individuals of color. The ancestral disparities in United States skeletal collections likely result not only from a lack of conversation between scientists and people of color, but also from a deep, historical mistrust between these communities. Further, in a nation where it still must be asserted that African American lives matter, communities of color must prioritize numerous other issues above studying the remains of individuals who are already deceased. Education level, religious preference, and socioeconomic status may also influence donation decisions, along with the fear of perceived complicity with a "white agenda." These issues are further complicated by the fact that social and medicolegal injustices may feed back into one another, potentially translating to ancestral disparities in whose remains are identified and who becomes a "cold case."

Forensic anthropologists use knowledge of human skeletal variation to resolve medicolegal cases, ultimately leading to identifications for the dead and justice for the living. When they use this expertise to inform broader conversations about scientific ethics and social justice, they have the potential to benefit not only the medicolegal system but also United States society as a whole. While forensic anthropologists may never amass skeletal collections that truly match United States ancestral demographics, this is a topic worth exploring—in all its complexities and from multiple, sometimes conflicting, perspectives.

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Race And Ancestry, Body Donation, Ethics