



## A13 Crossing the Borders of Linguistics, Ancestry, and Race in the Field of Forensic Anthropology

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**Learning Overview:** The learning objectives for this presentation include: (1) attendee appreciation of the linguistic complexities of applying biological information obtained from the human skeleton to medicolegal statements regarding racial identity; (2) a discussion of the strengths and limitations of current terminology utilized in scientific publications; and (3) a call for further discussion regarding the language used to describe ancestral affiliations.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating that the presence and acceptance of the overlap between biological ancestry and social race should be used as a way to open discussion about appropriate usage of terminology to reach a more holistic way of defining an individual's ancestry and racial identity based on their skeletal traits.

Forensic anthropologists must often navigate the borders between a holistic, theoretical science and the practical applications of the United States medicolegal system. On the one hand, forensic anthropologists recognize that humans display normal human variation that is not categorical in nature; yet, on the other hand, they provide medicolegal authorities with ancestral assessments to aid in the identification of unidentified human remains. To do so, forensic anthropologists rely on correlations between the expressions of certain biological traits and an individual's social race. While forensic anthropologists should be cognizant of the differences between assessed skeletal ancestry and social race, the scientific literature suggests otherwise, as the terminology for ancestry and the terminology for social race are often used interchangeably in the context of human identification and human identification research.

As the field of forensic anthropology continues to grow and populations continue to change, an emphasis on the use of terminology used to define an individual's ancestry and race becomes increasingly important to discuss. A review of forensic anthropology articles in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences* and the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* from 2008 to 2019 demonstrates a notable shift in how ancestry is defined and discussed. This may reflect larger trends in terminology and thinking in the field of anthropology as articulated by the American Anthropological Association statement on race.<sup>1</sup> Some authors have actively made the decision to emphasize that the specific terminology used in their publication may not be encompassing of all individuals classified within said group. While this emphasis in terminology is more commonly geared toward minority groups (such as Hispanics and Blacks), this idea can and should be applied to all ancestral groups of focus in the field. If the terminology used to describe an ancestral group cannot fully embrace the variation that exists within the group, a push toward a change in terminology should be the next step.

Anthropologists recognize that social race is complex, personal, and political. Colleagues in the American Association of Physical Anthropologists have recently articulated concerns regarding the overly simplistic equating of skeletal biology and social race and the potential sociopolitical consequences.<sup>2</sup> This presentation serves as an avenue to present questions and concepts to consider, such as: Why do researchers continue to narrow the definition of Hispanic and Black into distinct smaller and smaller subpopulations (for example: Caribbean Black, South Carolina Slave, Mexican, or North American Hispanic) while the definition of White seems to encompass individuals from a variety of geographic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds? Why are these distinctions never addressed or discussed in forensic anthropology reports aiding in the identification of human remains? Should the Anthropology Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences consider standardizing racial terminology used in forensic anthropology reports? What is the obligation of the forensic anthropologist to consider the broader cultural ramifications associated with the use of certain racial terminologies in their reports in regard to identification and investigation efforts?

The data in this presentation collected from the scientific literature supports the hypothesis that social race is culturally defined and evolves over time. Therefore, forensic anthropologists should consider not only how racial terminology impacts identification, but also the ways in which skeletal variation and social race are understood—or misunderstood—by the larger medicolegal community. Not only is this type of discussion important to the field of forensic anthropology in relation to biological profile construction, but its importance also expands to the medicolegal system, as improved terminology could ultimately lead to an improved identification process for unidentified human remains.

### Reference(s):

1. AAA Statement on Race, American Anthropological Association, May 17, 1998, <https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2583>.
2. AAPA Statement on Race and Racism, American Association of Physical Anthropologists, March 27, 2019, <https://physanth.org/about/position-statements/aapa-statement-race-and-racism-2019/>.

### Forensic Anthropology, Biological Ancestry, Social Race