



A89 Revisiting the Concepts of “Race” and “Ancestry” Regarding Missing Migrants in the United States

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the complicated history that anthropology has with the concepts of “race” and “ancestry” and how those knotty concepts continue to permeate the forensic identification process at the United States-Mexico border. Attendees will also better understand both the utility and dangers inherent in applying ancestral assessments specifically to missing migrant populations in the United States.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by generating a necessary discussion about the applicability of ancestral assessments to the forensic identification process and what it means regarding an individual’s identity. This presentation will contribute to the discourse by specifically investigating the utility of ancestry assessments on missing migrants.

The use of “ancestry” in the biological profile has its roots in the foundations of physical anthropology. These roots stem from the beliefs that there were true biological differences across various human populations and that certain groups of people were markedly different. The originators of these ideas believed that humans could be grouped into distinct “races,” or even that certain groups should be categorized as separate “species.” This vein of thought reduces individuals into racial typologies and does not adequately represent the true range of human variation. Contemporary anthropologists agree that “race is a social construct,” however this phrase belies the reality that the foundations of much of the current use of “ancestry” in the biological profile can be traced back to a problematic history. Modifying the terminology from “race” to “ancestry” is meaningless with the persistence of remaining underlying issues.

Currently, ancestral assessments utilize a range of different approaches including metric, non-metric, and macromorphoscopic methods. These techniques require an understanding of the range of biological variation and how it is expressed across populations, allowing anthropologists to rely on their experience to ascribe an ancestry estimation to an unidentified individual. In a forensic context, ancestry has historically been divided into discrete categories with varying terminology, such as “European American,” “African American,” etc. This type of categorization does not necessarily represent a decedent’s identity, particularly in instances in which an individual’s ancestry reflects a complex colonial history. Furthermore, there has been little, if any, reflection by forensic anthropologists based in the United States on how “ancestry” estimates are utilized in medicolegal investigations after the anthropological analysis has concluded. Research by scholars outside of anthropology have noted bias in media coverage related to missing persons cases and an unequal emphasis on resources allocated to certain classes of missing people. For example, “Missing White Woman Syndrome” has been described by scholars in criminology and empirical analyses of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data have confirmed the reality of this phenomenon.¹

By extension, the issues with ancestry and identity become magnified when dealing with migrant populations. Consider the example of migrants who perish along the United States-Mexico border and on-going efforts by forensic anthropologists working toward identification. An ancestry categorization as “Hispanic” or “admixed” does not help discern the actual geographic origins of an individual and does little to assist local medicolegal investigators. Treating such a diverse group as a monolith may dramatically reduce the efficacy of any ancestral assessments and has the potential to hinder the identification process. Furthermore, the marginalized and dehumanized status of migrant populations has also played a role in hindering the identification process.² Turning to research outside forensic anthropology, scholars in media studies have documented unequal treatment of Latina women who have been victimized by crime or who represent missing persons cases. Ultimately, forensic anthropologists working on migrant identification may need to acknowledge the structural barriers which characterize the medicolegal system in the United States and the reality that not all decedent deaths, and especially those of migrants, receive equal treatment at the conclusion of anthropological analyses.

Reference(s):

1. Sommers Z. 2017. Missing white woman syndrome: An empirical analysis of race and gender disparities in online news coverage of missing persons. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*.106(2):275-314.
2. Slakoff D.C., Brennan P.K. 2017. The Differential Representation of Latina and Black Female Victims in Front-Page News Stories: A Qualitative Document Analysis. *Feminist Criminology*.00(0):1-29.

Migrant, Ancestry, Identity