



A104 Assumed Differences and Unquestioned Typologies: The Oversimplification of Race and Ancestry in Forensic Anthropology

Nicolette Parr, PhD*, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency Laboratory, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, HI 96853; Allysha P. Winburn, PhD, University of West Florida, Pensacola, FL 32514; Sean D. Tallman, PhD, Boston University, Boston, MA 02118

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand how forensic anthropologists have used and defined “race” and “ancestry” in research.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating that forensic anthropologists have failed to thoroughly define concepts of “race” and “ancestry,” resulting in an oversimplification of complex biocultural processes. Additionally, forensic anthropologists have inconsistently explored the reasons for group-level differences or similarities, including population histories and/or structures and microevolutionary processes.

The discipline of forensic anthropology, a field tasked with analyzing skeletal remains to enable personal identification, has long assessed “race” or “ancestry” as part of the biological profile. Early methodological approaches were strictly typological in nature, which enabled their incorporation into racist perspectives. While practitioners may have shifted terminology from “race” to “ancestry” to describe regionally patterned human skeletal variation, the degree to which they have changed or critiqued long-embedded typological approaches remains unclear. This lack of clarity is problematic as it places the onus on the consumers of the literature to deduce what is meant by “race” or “ancestry” and leads to the faulty assumption that all researchers share the same, or similar, working definitions of “race” and “ancestry.”

Thus, this study reviewed 118 peer-reviewed forensic anthropology articles published between 1966 and 2020 in the *Journal of American Physical Anthropology*, *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, *Forensic Science International*, and *Forensic Anthropology* by identifying any combination of the publications’ key words “race,” “ancestry,” “ethnicity,” or “population affinity.” Data collected for each article included the publication year, methods utilized, groups studied, terminology used, and whether the authors defined “race” and “ancestry.” Additionally, it was noted which human groups were analyzed, the terminology utilized to identify the groups, whether the authors critiqued or otherwise contextualized the use of their chosen approaches, and whether they provided biocultural explanations for the observed population differences or similarities.

The data supported the primary hypothesis that, while the term “ancestry” has supplanted the term “race” to describe affinities with human populations, this change in terminology has not brought concurrent changes in approach, nor deeper scrutiny of underlying concepts. In this sample, the key terms “race” and “ancestry” were infrequently defined (in 14% and 11% of articles, respectively), and a plethora of social, geographic, and pseudo-scientific terms persisted in reference to human population groups—including, as recently as 2015, the “Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Negroid” scheme. Forensic anthropologists have increasingly engaged with questions addressing the biocultural forces patterning human biological variation: 64% of studies postdating 1999 discussed population histories, population structures, and microevolution, compared with 38% of studies published between 1966 and 1999. However, the amount of attention given to population histories, populations structures, and microevolutionary processes seemed to differ depending on the groups under study and their perceived “complexity.” Population histories and structures were often limited to these “complex” groups, such as Hispanics, South Africans, or Asian-derived populations. Further, fewer studies contextualized or critiqued approaches to analyzing population variation (32% of studies postdating 1999, compared with 4% from 1966–1999), and virtually no studies considered the possibility that skeletal variation reflected embodied social inequality (5% of studies postdating 1999; 0% from 1966–1999).

Complex concepts demand complex approaches, particularly when they carry a history of injustice and oppression and have contributed to racist ideologies. Thus, it is imperative that forensic anthropologists explicitly define the human population concepts that structure and guide their research. While the lack of explicit definitions regarding “race” and “ancestry” and the limited engagement with the biocultural processes that contribute to skeletal variability in the published literature may be partly due to editorial and peer-review pressures, it is likely that many forensic anthropologists have not interrogated their own perspectives and definitions. This lack of interrogation and clarity contributes to the faulty notion that all forensic anthropologists share similar definitions and leads to an oversimplification of complex biocultural processes.

Forensic Anthropology, Human Biological Variation, Critical Race Theory