

## A112 Don't Let Your World Be Too Small: The Relevance of Identity and Skeletal Populations

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to describe social or economic factors influencing racial self labeling in the United States. Attendees will be able to summarize sources of population data and forces affecting skeletal population formation and apply the data to a local circumstance.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a decedent-focused approach to skeletal identification and illustrating a model for professional development of the concept of “forensic population served.”

If the goal of biological profile development is repatriation of the decedent, then knowledge of the population one serves is a requirement. This presentation describes the social and economic relevance of race labeling in the United States, as if race is a label that should be applied with the goal of intersecting with the decedent family's use of the label. The ability to have a dynamic concept of race is improved by knowledge of historical and recent demographics and economies.

In this presentation, the concept of forensic catchment, or the forensic population served, is emphasized as a component of professional training that is a combination of: (1) historical and current population demographics; (2) local, national, and/or historic economic practices featuring human remains; (3) social forces affecting identity and local mortuary practices; and (4) the proximal circumstances of the death event. Catchment awareness must be trained or experienced. One of the consequences of higher education is employment in a location other than the one in which one was raised or trained. Without training, knowledge of the population served may be based on a narrow range of experience, years of experience, or exposure to a demographic shift. Considering appropriate social variables for each skeleton is the challenge, but the benefit is successful repatriation or a meaningful disposition.

Forensic anthropologists are good at identifying biological affiliation, and that affiliation may align with race labels in locations where race identification is not dynamic and where populations are not underrepresented in statistical databases.<sup>1</sup> Challenging circumstances include metropolitan areas with diverse populations and a generous supply of social labels, and individual circumstances where racial identity is strongly influenced by skin color. In the latter circumstance, racial classification will fail to repatriate the individual whose cranium is morphologically of African descent but whose skin is light enough to access a more beneficial social or economic status.

Focusing on repatriation of remains may require consideration of non-skeletal features such as associated clothing and artifacts, the location where the remains were found, the demographics of the neighbors, and the local economy. At minimum, applying this focus requires knowledge of the demographics in the reasonable geographic area. Reasonable is defined by context, including personal effects or artifacts found with or on the remains.

The multi-field anthropological approach empowers forensic anthropologists to communicate with death investigators in scope beyond skeletal variation, including interpretation of the relevance of property and demographic data. This knowledge may not confirm an identity, but it can assist the death investigator by providing directions for contacts and interviews. One of the benefits of anthropological training is that the anthropologist recognizes the internal versus the external point of view. When point of view is an aspect of race labeling of human remains, the consideration is “Will a label I apply agree sufficiently with the family's knowledge of the decedent that the remains can be identified?” This may be a conceptual hurdle. From this perspective, the focus of biological profile analysis orients to the benefit of the decedent's family, not to completing a scientific puzzle or exploring a skeleton.

### Reference(s):

- <sup>1</sup>. Ouseley S., Jantz R., and Freid D. (2009). Understanding Race and Human Variation: Why Forensic Anthropologists are good at identifying race.” *AJPA* 139:68-76.

### Racial Identity, Decedent Identity, Skeletal Population