Changing the Landscape of Identity in Forensic Anthropology

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Abstract

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Keywords

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The articles that comprise this special issue, "Changing the Landscape of Identity in Forensic Anthropology," grew from a symposium titled "Expanding Boundaries: Embracing the Intersectionality of Forensic Anthropology to Account for the Changing Landscape of Identity in Current Casework." These papers were intended to be presented at the 2020 meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (now the American Association of Biological Anthropologists). However, when the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated canceling the conference, we offered the opportunity for researchers to expand their intended presentations. We are grateful that, despite the events that changed many of our personal and professional lives over the last few years, many symposium participants transformed their contributions into the rich body of research presented here.

This two-part special issue focuses on the expanded potential of forensic anthropological research as the discipline continues to develop multidisciplinary approaches for understanding identity, incorporating new sources of information and new methodologies, and leveraging preexisting approaches in new ways. The research showcased here uses diverse data and forward-thinking applications—historical, demographic, dental, skeletal, and genomic—to tackle the complexities of identity in forensic casework. These studies engage critically with parameters of the biological profile from many different perspectives but with shared concern for practical applications within the field.

Operating in the context of this theme, all of the contributions highlight the need for a renewed dialogue in the field. Kenyhercz, Konigsberg et al., and Spake et al. problematize the straightforward adoption of prevailing methodologies through their presentations of advanced theory. They demonstrate risks of methodological misuse and misidentification that result from uncritical acceptance of standard practice. Kenyhercz challenges the ancestry estimation methodology used by forensic anthropologists for decades by providing an exploratory methodology of unsupervised learning techniques, an approach that does not require a priori group selection or assumptions when comparing an individual against different groups. In doing so, the author contests the norms of analysis, encouraging practitioners to broaden their perspectives on what it means to assess human variation at the level of the individual or group. Konigsberg et al., in surfacing procedural fallacies, underscore the sobering reality of the real human consequences in poor methodology. Asking us to rethink our role as experts in the production and acceptance of forensic evidence, the authors analyze the consistency in development of the first and second mandibular molars for predicting minimum age thresholds. They thus demonstrate the bounds of juvenile age estimation within this context and

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assert that use of biological markers for minimum age of criminal responsibility is not reliable. Spake et al. explore the potential of incorporating into the forensic tool kit formulas that estimate body mass for use on modern juvenile remains. Their research emphasizes the contribution of population variation to body composition, and they argue that, while body mass estimation methodology has potential, the consistent underestimation of weight may result in inaccurate exclusions during the investigative process. Therefore, the authors suggest continued exploration of the topic and deep integration of broad anthropological methodologies that consider population-specific contributors to body composition, such as socioeconomic status, and incorporate growth patterns.

New et al. bring to the fore data use strategies that provide access to nuances in identifying immigrants who lost their lives in the US southern border region, problematizing what are often taken to be single, stable forensic populations by researchers who stand at a distance from the actual casework and evolving crisis. The authors demonstrate the investigative potential of genetic population data for persons whose communities of origin are unknown, arguing that mobilizing the breadth of genetic data available to forensic investigators, in tandem with multiple modes of analysis, provides an additional tool to help caseworkers refine their investigation. Their research views genetic data under a biocultural lens of significance for forensic anthropology and shows how valuable population learnings can be surfaced from data already collected during the forensic investigative process (CODIS short tandem repeats). Similarly, Afra et al. problematize assumptions of straightforward relationships between genetic, skeletal, and soft tissue data, yet they also bring key insights to how we might leverage these findings in integrated approaches to the study of human variation and forensic identification. The authors integrate these data to bring clarity to their points of intersection. Their work underscores how, without better foundational knowledge of these relationships, we miss out on the potential advantages offered by approaching human identification as a codependent process between forensic genetics and forensic anthropology.

Finally, Taylor et al. and Adams and Pilloud anchor this collection in the often underserved social side of forensic anthropology. Adams and Pilloud demonstrate the technical reach of biological anthropology as we tackle questions of identity through survey methodology. They present the results of a survey on current attitudes, perspectives, and approaches to race and ancestry within biological anthropology. Through this research, the authors provide a variety of recommendations to address discordances their survey identified in teaching modes, research techniques, and public engagement strategies, from the language used and how our discussions are structured to the modernization of communication methodologies. Taylor et al. deliver case discussions that, while learning tools themselves, drive home a bigger message that forensic casework should be first informed by the fundamentals of "doing" anthropology. In this light, they encourage readers to reevaluate how we reconcile discordant lines of evidence and to embrace how the often-muddied waters of culture can bring unexpected clarity to our understanding of biology. Their research addresses the complexities and possible inconsistences across different lines of biological, social, and material evidence that must be addressed for identifications to move forward. Furthermore, the authors show how mobilizing social theory in casework and case building can help contextualize or ground fluid social identities through time. This article advocates for a holistic biosocial anthropological approach to identity building, arguing that it is necessary for facilitating forensic identifications not just in the historic context discussed by the authors but also in other contexts of humanitarian or disaster victim identification.

As forensic anthropologists, we seek to meet the professional expectations of the medicolegal system and to serve the wishes of the families and communities for whom our efforts are deeply personal. We are thus positioned at the junction of the methods and theories that inform biological anthropology and the unique identification demands of our casework. To better respond to needs of the field, the research presented in this two-part special issue indicates that we must continue to develop a cross-disciplinary discourse that spans the many boundaries between social and natural science subjects and their modes of analysis. We believe that, by adopting an intersectional perspective in the identification of human remains,

forensic anthropologists are well equipped with the knowledge and resources needed to perform transformative scientific and social justice work. More specifically, we argue that forensic anthropologists must act as a conduit for the practical application of the academic theories underlying the estimation of the parameters of identity that define the biological profile.

Through all of these contributed articles runs a common thread: the authors provide different but complementary frameworks for analysis, thinking, and self-reflection through which we as biological anthropologists and forensic specialists can continue to refine our research and improve the success of our casework, by thinking critically, more holistically, and with an interest in advancement to a better consensus.