

Jim: Hi. I'm Jim.

Erik: And I'm Erik.

Jo: And I'm Jo. And this is speaking of race. So today we're going to talk with forensic anthropologists, Sean Tallman and Allysha Winburn. Dr. Tallman is an assistant professor of anatomy and neurobiology and also an affiliate assistant professor of anthropology at Boston University. Hey, Sean.

Sean: Hello.

Jo: Dr. Parr is not able to be with us today, but we'll say hello in her absence. She's a forensic anthropologist at the Defense P.O.W./M.I.A. Accounting Agency in Hawaii. And Dr. Winburn is also here with us. She's an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of West Florida. Hi, Allysha.

Allysha: Hi. It's a pleasure to be here. Thanks for having us.

Jo: You bet. So these folks have recently published an article on the oversimplification of race and ancestry in forensic anthropology, which is why they are here today. We wanted to talk to them to find out what the deal is with skeletal race, which is something we really haven't discussed much on the podcast at all. Just to start off, it's probably worth explaining what forensic anthropology is for those listeners who might not know. Forensic anthropology is the application of biological anthropology to criminal and legal contexts. So when unidentified human remains are found, it's often a forensic anthropologist who will do the analysis to attempt to figure out attributes of that person in order to hopefully at least assist with the identification of those remains. Principally, forensic anthropologists are usually looking to identify age, assign sex, height, trauma to the body, and then race using estimation methods that we'll talk about more in a little bit. And so we wanted to talk to this group of scholars today because there's been a lot of controversy in anthropology about the identification of race in skeletal remains, particularly given that most of anthropology, you know, now agrees that biological race is not a reality. So we need to do maybe just a little bit of history to keep Erik happy. What do you think? Well.

Erik: I didn't know I was being catered to. Okay, thanks.

Jim: With all these anthropologists on this session, it seems like we have to do something for Erik, right?

Erik: I need red meat.

Jim: Yeah, well, since I'm old, I can do the history. All right.

Erik: Okay.

Jim: All three of the biological anthropologists on the podcast today, share an apical ancestor in our academic clans. And that's Earnest Hooton, the early 20th century, Harvard physical anthropologist. I happen to be a grand student of Hooton's. And this is an important fact, because many anthropologists blame Hooton for the widespread use of a typological concept of race that is, the division of humans into racial groups based on easily observable characteristics like skull shape or skin color. And also, to a certain extent, he gets blamed for the long lasting polygenic view of race that has continued to occur in

anthropology in this country, where races are seen as separate species. These perspectives on race came from Hooton's exposure to two particular scholars. The first was the Scottish anatomist and anthropologist and scientific racist Arthur Keith, and then also the senior anthropology faculty member at Harvard, Roland Dixon. It's Hooton, though, of all of the people in our anthropological history that left such a large legacy in terms of the students he trained in biological, which was then called physical anthropology at Harvard. The biological reality of typological polygenic race just exploded throughout American anthropology as Hooton's students took over the training of biological anthropologists throughout American universities. So I wanted to go to the work that Sean and Allysha did and talk about the inflection points that they found in the literature and changes of how we use terms of ancestry and race. And we will get to that in more detail. But I just wanted to reflect a minute about my skeletal biology training. I took this from another grand student of Hooton. She was actually a student of W.W. Howells, when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley in the early 1970s. And this was a time period when ideas about race were shifting quite a bit within the discipline of anthropology. At that point in time, I was taught the standard protocols for determining the race of a skeletal specimen, and there wasn't really any sort of critical reflection on what we were doing or why we were doing it. It was just, this is the methodology that you use to come to a conclusion about an unknown skeleton. I'd be interested to hear what your training experiences were, how you were trained with regard to ideas of race and ancestry with skeletal collections, if you could give us your experience.

Allysha: So in terms of my training, I've been practicing forensic anthropology for about 15 years. And so when I was getting into it in the early 2000s, skull typologies were definitely still a thing. So skull typologies are basically all of the skeletal and dental variation of a vast and diverse swath of humanity as somehow smooshed into a single type skull that you have to endeavor to match your unidentified remains to. And so these type skulls were still typically indexed continentally during my training African, Asian, European, and we were usually given three to choose from kind of that classic Big Three typological approach. Now, just a few years prior to my start in grad school FORDISC, which is the forensic discriminant function software that we use to compare cranial measurements to identified individuals, that had just been updated. So there was definitely some movement past base typologies. But the standard operating protocols at the lab where Sean and I cut our teeth still said race.

Sean: You know, I was coming up in anthropology as an undergrad in the late nineties. And so, you know, it's very much at that time of biological anthropology where we weren't talking much about the biological basis of race, and rightfully so, but that we weren't talking much about it at all. And, you know, I was at the University of Washington. We didn't have any skeletal anatomy training. So I got training in a bio archeological field school. So I was first exposed to it in a much more bioarcheological way. And they approached it, you know, in discussing biological distance, the potential relatedness between archeological groups. And then in graduate school, you know, ended up taking a course in forensic anthropology, having to do what Allysha has talked about, the sort of three group tripartite classification. And I was always somewhat uncomfortable with that approach, and in part because we weren't having those discussions about the issues with that and we were just sort of doing it. It wasn't until later on where Allysha and I met at the joint P.O.W./M.I.A. Accounting Command Central Identification Laboratory. Like Allysha said, we had a race category of our report, and that was kind of where we were also questioning our engagement with that. And again, it was largely the three groupings of European-American, African-American, Asian-American. So that, I think, is where Allysha and I started our discussions about this stuff.

Jim: It's really like the Human Genome Project, where when the granting agency tells you you have to report in these four or five categories because of course, when they started there were four races and

by the time they finished, there were five in the census, you really have the government setting up the categories for you and you have to find those in your results because that's how you have to report them.

Allysha: Yeah, yeah. There was definitely that sense that, well, you know, service members at the lab that we were working at were only given three boxes to check. And so we were also only given three boxes to check. But it's just that lack of critique that Sean highlighted that I think really sort of spawned this paper all those years later.

Jo: Okay. So speaking of the article, getting back to it, I really enjoyed it. It is for those of you who are interested in following up and checking it out, which I recommend you do. It's titled Assumed Differences on Question Typologies, The Oversimplification of Race and Ancestry in Forensic Anthropology and it was published just this year in the journal Forensic Anthropology. So the article basically reviews several decades of forensic anthropology work. And in four key journals. Right? And looks at how race or ancestry or both has been defined or in some most cases actually not defined and implemented. Could you just give our listeners a very quick overview, sort of a lay summary of of what you see as the most important insights from that article?

Allysha: Yeah. So we surveyed 119 articles published between the year 1966 and the year 2020. And we found that by the year 2013, the term ancestry had almost completely replaced race. But the typological nature of these ancestry approaches were rarely critiqued. And so, in essence, racial terms like black and white were basically just swapped out for continental terms like African and European. But the assumption that human variation maps onto bounded static groups was not critiqued and the terms, ancestry and race themselves were rarely defined, just between 12 and 13% of the time. And it was even rarer for forensic anthropologist to consider that where human skeletal variation does exist, it might actually be the result of embodied social inequity, not any sort of inherent biological differences among human populations. So the possibility for embodied social inequity was considered 0% of the time in our earliest papers, and just 5% of the time, even in the most recent papers that we reviewed.

Sean: We were looking at these four major journals that are responsible for what we know about ancestry in forensic anthropology. In addition to looking at how ancestry and race were infrequently defined, we also looked at whether our authors were exploring why human skeletal variation and differences exist between whatever populations they were looking at. So whether they engaged with the micro evolutionary processes or the population histories, the population structures that could be producing those differences or contributing to those differences, and that could also be the skeletal embodiment of injustices as well. We looked at that and found that it has increased over the years. You know, overall about 59% of papers were engaging with that. And in the recent time period between 2013 and 2020, that went up to about 63%. That were engaging with those discussions of why and not just ending with the fact that there are differences between groups. About a third of the time, people are not engaging with sort of the whys of why there are differences between population groups.

Erik: And that actually runs into one of the questions that I've had and I think that we've talked about frequently on this podcast, it seems like, you know, over the 20th century and now into the 21st century, there's what we might call the typological concept of race, something that Stephen Jay Gould called essentialism back in the eighties when he writes Mismeasure of Man. How have you seen that

idea about race change in your examination of these papers really over the entire last third of the 20th century and now almost the first third of the 21st century?

Sean: In our literature review and in our content analysis, we found that it really hasn't changed that much, that really we've taken the typological approach of race. And when race was deemed as a not appropriate term to describe regionally patterned skeletal variation and change that to ancestry that really those typological approaches largely came with that. I think that maybe individual practitioners might not necessarily think this way in a strict, typological sense that we would think about with the early folks like Hooton and others. But at the same time, the literature isn't necessarily saying otherwise. And I think that is the problem. So I think that we've come a long way since the late sixties and seventies in understanding human skeletal variation and the genetics behind that and understanding the sociocultural and bio cultural impacts of what's going on to some extent. But at the same time, it's still very much typological, at least in the literature. And so we are doing better with understanding the population distribution of some of these traits and that they're not divided up on these racial lines. But at the same time, the literature isn't necessarily going out of its way to explain how that isn't technological.

Erik: So to dumb it down for the historian, is this basically am I hearing you right? Are you basically saying, Sean, that we have the same boxes in forensic anthropology as we've always had? We've just put different labels on the outside of the boxes or are there more boxes now and they have different labels, or are there no more boxes at all? Is it like a big pool?

Sean: Great question. Largely we have the same boxes, and I think that goes back to what we were talking about earlier in that the bureaucratic government forms that we fill out and check self-identified race box to that we have our field has sort of been held to those categories. And in some ways I think a lot of folks in our field will say that we have to follow those categories because that's how people self-identified and so engaging with that without critically thinking about the use of those categories. So I still think that we largely have the 3 to 5 group classification, but that it has expanded in that we have been doing more work with, say, the big group that is, say falls under Asian category, right? This huge category right of of many different countries. And I mean, just so much diversity exploring that there's just so much diversity within that grouping that we can potentially separate out different in different groups if we get more, more fine tuned. But largely it is based on those five major racial groupings from the bureaucratic government reporting forms.

Jo: A few years ago, Jim and I conducted this little survey of the degree to which anthropologists, like professional anthropologists, accepted or didn't accept the idea that race was a biologically valid category. And we actually had like a good, what, six or 700 respondents from across the subfields? Yeah, we never published the data. It just happened that somebody else was conducting a similar study that they did publish in 2017, which we'll link to in the show notes as Wagner and colleagues. And both they and we in our unpublished data found that like 90% or more of anthropologists surveyed said, No, we understand that race is not a biologically valid category. So that's like that's pretty encouraging, right? And our study and Wagner's too was inspired by the fact that other other surveys had been done in previous decades by Liebermann and colleagues for the most part, which and those ones found that, you know, as as much as like back in the 1970s, a much larger proportion of anthropologists would have endorsed the idea that race was biological, like half, you know. So there's been a big this seems like there's been a kind of a sea change in the discipline, broadly speaking, towards this, accepting the idea that that race is not biological, which jeez, there better be, right? Like if we're the ones who are teaching about the nature of race. But you know, it strikes me based on

listening to your description, Sean, of of what forensic anthropology does with at least in part what it's doing here is looking at skulls and trying to find biological markers of race. It strikes you that this discipline might have been among the most resistant areas in anthropology to accept this idea that race isn't biological. And I'm just curious about how you square that or how you see the discipline of forensic anthropology squaring the idea that race isn't biological, with the fact that a lot of it is devoted to looking for sort of skeletal biological signatures of race.

Sean: I think our discipline has been somewhat separate from the larger field of biological anthropology in that regard, obviously, where biological anthropology has, more broadly speaking, been engaging with those discussions a little bit more. And forensic anthropology is, I think, only kind of recently starting to. As forensic anthropologists, our aim is to identify the individual. We want to use our knowledge of human skeletal biology and human skeletal variation to say something about the biological profile of a set of remains. So that is the assigned sex of the individual, the age at death of the individual, how tall the individual was, maybe the ancestry, because we aren't all on the same page that we do. We have been interrogating this for a bit, so we've been pretty slow but excited to see that that there has been some change in progress with that.

Erik: So you say that you're slow, but I don't actually think that you're slow.

Sean: Okay.

Erik: So interestingly so we on this podcast have asked similar sorts of questions of lots of different kinds of constituents. And one of the groups that we picked on were people that were working in genetics, professional geneticists. And when you take a look at the path by which they go away from the language race into something else, it doesn't look that different than what you're describing in forensic anthropology. So, for instance, this is something we talked about on that previous episode. In 2008, the National Human Genome Research Institute held this workshop on ethical, legal and social issues in natural selection research. And one of the things that we discovered is that the terminological shift away from using the word race seems to coincide with that particular that particular workshop. So after 2008, geneticists start to move away from using the word race. But it's a huge but just because they stop using the word race doesn't mean and this connects to something you said before, it doesn't mean they stop using the the typological concept. They're still using the same boxes. They just scribbled out the old words on the front of the box and wrote in a different word. At least that's what it appears to be from our perspective. And then there's a second thing, I think, that suggests that forensic anthropology isn't slow. So in 2011 Ann Morning publishes this book, *The Nature of Race*. So she's a sociologist and she does these broad surveys of biology professors, sociology professors, psychology professors and anthropology professors at U.S. universities. And she discovers also around 2000, much like your paper suggests, the terminology begins to shift away from using the word race. But it doesn't get rid of the concept, it just changes the word. But other than that, it's basically teaching the same stuff. As always. So I think one of the things that your paper does that's so great is that it gets to extend the timeline a little bit later and say that actually after 2013, it really does seem to be the case that people have completely removed the term race and have started to slightly, just slightly challenge the concept of race, you know, well after the term itself is not being used anymore. So I think that's one of the reasons why your paper is so important.

Sean: In the later years between, say, in our paper, 2013 and 2020, we are using ancestry instead of race, but we haven't done that. The unpacking of what that necessarily means, there has been change

for sure just within the last couple of years. In particular, there's been increases in publications that are specifically examining the forensic anthropologists' role in race and ancestry estimation.

Jim: That's progress, then. You know that that's encouraging to me. It was very difficult to read your article and to see you making the same complaint that I made 30 years ago that Doug Cruz and I, in the initial issue of *Ethnicity and Disease*, trying to get people to define their terms. And you find that even today that's still so rare that people define what race or ancestry is. It is just very discouraging that that we're moving so slowly and yet, like Erik says, you know, you're making progress at least as rapidly as most fields and maybe better than some. I really like some of the concluding statements in your article where you're talking about trying to get people to pivot from ideas, assuming that we all share the same definition for race and ancestry, and moving over to the ideas of trying to center definitions that are meaningful for forensic anthropology. And then you go on to make the argument that this will require forensic anthropologists to question and come to terms with their own perspectives. Like you were just talking about. How much do you really feel that this is going to happen in forensic anthropology in the very near future? Or is this something that you're hoping your students, students will be able to take advantage of?

Sean: I think that I am hopeful. As Erik brought up, things are changing and again, much more in the last couple of years. And I think moving forward, there's there's going to be a lot more. And I think we're seeing the starting of that right now. So I am hopeful. I am also really hopeful, particularly of the younger generation and my students, and they are excited about engaging in this material. In some circles in forensic anthropology, there is the debate of should we abandon ancestry.

Jo: And so, Sean, you mentioned teaching master's students. How do you teach about this stuff, like about race, particularly in your in your forensic anthropology classes or labs or with your masters students?

Sean: I teach a class that's just forensic anthropology methods, so that one is a purely methodologically based course. You know, we have a couple of weeks on ancestry methods. I have them obviously read the methodological papers and do the methods on our skeletons that we have when they're doing that process. They also have to think about the problems of these methods, not just do the methods and say, "great, I know how to estimate ancestry." In looking at the sample sizes of the collections that these methods are built on how diverse are they? How small or big are those sample sizes? Looking at the limitations of these methods, I posed the question of do you think that ancestry should be a part of forensic anthropology? Should we report on Ancestry? I get them to think about that because they're going to have a choice about whether they're going to do ancestry or not.

Jo: So how about you, Allysha? How do you handle this in your classrooms?

Allysha: I try to be very honest and upfront with my students about both the historic complicity of the discipline with the race concept and then also the struggles that we have with the concept that are ongoing. I also have completely transitioned to the terminology and approach of population affinity rather than ancestry or race.

Jim: You're warming the cockles of Sherry Washburn's heart.

Allysha: Oh, oh, oh.

Jim: Yes, he was one of my undergrad profs. And of course.

Allysha: Really?

Jim: Yeah. Yeah, he would love to hear that.

Allysha: That's fantastic. Yeah. So, I mean, I'm saying, oh, I've shifted to use this term, but of course the term has been in existence for some time. But it's, it's just not only does it not have the baggage of race or of ancestry, which I would argue ancestry when it's done as continental ancestry is pretty biologically deterministic, but population affinity, I mean, a population can be a small or as large as the reference data support. And when you say population, it gets you away from that biological determinism, it allows for the social, not just the biological factors to be considered, like how have human interactions and human social systems, structured human variation, who do we mate with? Who do we say that we are not permitted to mate with? Might the skeletal variation that we see in modern human populations be socially produced and not hereditary at all? I mean, we know that living as a member of a socially marginalized group can literally feedback negatively to someone's biological well-being. Well, might that not also feed back into the skeletal and dental variation that we see? And so if we take ancestry and race out of the equation altogether and instead focus on these finer grained population, analyzes that can be regionally, socially or biologically defined, it enables us to really sort of foreground human interactions and reject that biologic determinism of both race and ancestry. I teach the history I do, but I try to emphasize that there is a way forward that can issue both of those terms and approaches.

Erik: I was going to ask why you think those particular years matter in your timeline, in your paper.

Jim: You're talking about the change in 2000 when ancestry begins to be used as a major term instead of race, and then in 2013, when ancestry almost completely supplants race in the forensic anthropology literature.

Erik: Do you think that something happened in the culture of forensic anthropology? Do you think it's wider? It was American culture or Western culture or.

Jim: Or is it just editors and paper reviewers?

Erik: Yeah. Or is it really local?

Sean: That's a good question. I think the date of 2000 and 2013 around 2000, what we found with the American Journal of Physical Anthropology, there was a real big gap in publications between 1984 and 2000 that specifically dealt with race and ancestry in forensic anthropology around that time period, a lot of it in the literature. Well, one Stephen Jay Gould's Mismeasure of Man was the second edition came out in 96, C. Loring Brace's work, and then there was a bunch of other criticisms about by biological anthropologists of forensic anthropology using race and ancestry and then growing awareness that we shouldn't be using the term race to describe regionally patterned skeletal variation. And then seeing Norm Sauers work from 92 and Ken Kennedy's work from 95. How these advocate for using the term ancestry over race. All those contributed to the increasing use of ancestry.

Jim: Well, there were a lot of soft tissue in living population editors of around that time. I was an associate editor so I know, I know that time period. Yeah.

Allysha: This may or may not be coincidental, but 2013 was around the time that the JPAC now DPAA transitioned in the terminology that they used from race to ancestry. And that has definitely been sort of a mover and shaker lab in the field of forensic anthropology, producing a lot of people, producing a lot of scholars. And so perhaps when they shifted, many of their employees did as well.

Jim: That makes sense.

Erik: I was wondering if either of you were going to say the conclusion of the Human Genome Project, because there was that big thing at the White House where Clinton said, given that we've got this data now, we can't really claim that there are these hard divisions between races. But but maybe that doesn't percolate into the literature that quickly.

Jim: Us biological anthropologists knew that already.

Erik: Right. Right.

Sean: We're beyond that. Yeah, that's a that's interesting. I don't know if it really trickled down into forensic.

Erik: Okay.

Jim: There are so many bleed overs between what happened in the human genome Project and what you're talking about going on with race in forensic is just really striking. As you're talking, I'm just thinking, you know, their use of race really looks so much like what's gone on in in forensic.

Erik: And I thought you might catch a blip around 1994 and the publication of The Bell Curve, but maybe there wasn't. It sounds like what you're saying, Sean, is actually that was a dark. There wasn't really much being written right around then at all.

Sean: Yeah. Particularly in AJPA. In forensics there was in the nineties there was a lot of, of ancestry based papers, methodology based. But again, they're not discussing the bigger picture things. They're discussing the methods primarily.

Jim: That valley period that you're talking about in AJPA, that's right about when I started to close down teaching about race at all in my intro physical classes because I thought it was over. I don't need to teach about this anymore.

Erik: Wow!

Jim: Yeah, that's that's exactly that time period. The mindset set at that time was it's over, you know, we won. They lost. Race is gone. And I was good, you know, for about a year and a half like that. And then it went to hell on me.

Allysha: Yeah, I don't doubt that that has something to do with the AJPA valley, that sort of attitude.

Sean: Hmm. And I think with more recent engagements and the recent change that we're seeing is coming about with that self-reflection, but then also examining diversity more broadly, speaking of our

field in that so much of this is tied into who are our practitioners, who is producing the knowledge. Historically, we've been pretty homogenous in who makes up forensic anthropology. So there's been recent critiques and recent confrontations of those questions as well, which I think tie into these other research related questions about ancestry, about population affinity, and about biological sex or assigned sex at birth. With a diversity of practitioners now we are starting to see a move in a better direction of addressing these issues a little bit more broadly.

Erik: That makes sense.

Sean: And that's super important, I think, for the field.

Allysha: Absolutely. I think as the the face of the field changes, the questions that we're interested will change. Our approaches will change. I have seen just over my time in the field a shift from the purely methodological to a little more theoretical. And I think that that methodological focus really explains a lot of the fact that we just never critiqued these concepts because the rhetoric was always, if we're making IDs, then it's justifiable. If we are making identifications, then the fact that we might be inadvertently reifying race is somehow justified. And now I mean, now we have scholars asking do our group affinity estimates actually advance IDs? Or is there the possibility that even if we check the right box, it's the box of someone who was a member of a socially marginalized group? And then is there the possibility that that might actually stymie their case resolution? So people are raising these questions now in a way that they had not previously. And the discussion that is resulting has been really productive.

Sean: Our field is engaging with theory more than it has in the past. I think that we've been reluctant in some ways that we've been sort of atheoretical you know, we have underlying evolutionary theory and, you know, the guiding principles of what produces skeletal variation. But at the same time, we haven't been engaging critical race theory or queer theories or embodiment theory that can help to explain some of our research. We have been increasing our engagement with theoretical concepts, which is hugely beneficial because it's going to be able to offer alternate explanations as to why things may be. And it's not just purely only biologically based reason. So I think that that that has been really important for our field.

Jo: Well, Sean and Allysha, thank you so much for being with us today and our hellos and good wishes to Nicolette as well.

Sean: Thank you for having us. We appreciate it.

Allysha: It's been it's been great.

Jo: I'm Jo, the cultural anthropologist.

Erik: I'm Erik, the historian of science.

Jim: I'm Jim. The biological anthropologist. And you've been listening to Speaking of Race.

Jo: Find us on Facebook at SORpodcast on Twitter and Instagram @speakingofrace and wherever you get your podcasts.

Erik: Thanks so much for listening....Fun fact: for one quarter of graduate school I was a forensic anthropologist and went on actual forensic anthropology response things in central Ohio. I was on You Ready for it? FARTCO, the forensic anthropology response team of Central Ohio. I'm not making that up.

The paper being discussed in this episode was:

Tallman, S. D., Parr, N. M., & Winburn, A. P. (2021). Assumed Differences; Unquestioned Typologies: The Oversimplification of Race and Ancestry in Forensic Anthropology. *Forensic Anthropology, Early View*, 1-24. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5744/fa.2020.0046>

Additional Resources:

- J. Bindon, M. Peterson, & L. J. Weaver (Producer). (2017, 11/14/2017). Race and the Human Genome Project [Retrieved from <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/race-and-the-human-genome-project>]
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