TEACHING RACE IN THE CONTEXT OF FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY:
ASSESSING LEARNING ON A TOPIC THAT PRESENTS AN ETHICAL DELIMMA

Abstract
Race is a contentious topic in anthropology because its use has enduring political implications. Within biological anthropology “race” has gone from an acceptable way to categorize human variation to a forbidden word. Despite the taboo, race as a legal identity in the United States is real and necessary to confront when working with modern forensic cases. I guided my forensic anthropology course in the basics of estimating race using both standard qualitative and quantitative measures on individually assigned skulls. This learning evaluation was applied as a member of the 2009-2010 member of the Teagle Collegium on Inquiry in Action. Learning assessments to measure prior knowledge and changes of opinion after class exercises were designed based on templates provided by Angelo and Cross (1993). Student responses in their final case report provided the best feedback. Student opinions on whether race could be measured and whether it should be used in forensic identification differed significantly (Chi-square, p=0.028). Students viewed race as something that could not be measured, however they believed race should be estimated for forensic identifications. These are opposing and seemingly contradictory viewpoints. Although students were comfortable in estimating sex and age, the estimation of race appeared to present them with an ethical dilemma.

Introduction
In Spring 2010, I taught L230 Forensic Anthropology to a group of twenty-four students from the Collins Living Learning Center (CLLC) who were of sophomore and junior standing with majors in the arts and sciences. The majority of the students were White, middle-class and female. This was the second time that I had taught the course to Collins students, and the fourth time I had taught the course at Indiana University, Bloomington. The course carries math and science credits due to the emphasis of laboratory methods applied in forensics.

I designed the course to incorporate inductive learning, whereby each student was assigned a specific skull at the beginning of the semester to observe, analyze and investigate for the duration of the class. The laboratory became a learning space where the students could actively build upon their knowledge through new experiences and hands-on activities. I made every attempt to create a safe space, where sensitive topics related to forensics could be discussed. Since the majority of the students were familiar with television shows that deal with forensic themes, they were already familiar with crime-scene terminology and were primed to begin thinking like an expert.

Students were assigned skulls from individuals from India (from the Carolina Biological Supply) and Indiana that are curated for the Indiana State Police. Students were assigned the role as the primary investigator for their “case.” In order to investigate their case fully, they needed to apply the methods presented and performed in class as exercises and critique the methods for their applicability to their case. These exercises were problem-based group activities that served to develop their scientific thinking. I emphasized commonsense in the exercises, hoping that their experiences of looking sexual and racial features on living people would transfer to their ability and confidence in looking at their case’s associated features. Although they are graded solely on the work they performed on their case, they were encouraged to talk to their classmates and look at
other skulls in the classroom in order to understand their case – this is situation led to collaborative learning since they had to seek out other classmates to discuss their own observations. During the exercises, I would talk to each student, respond to questions and provided immediate feedback. I emphasized the problem-solving process rather than the solution by applying the Socratic method of guided questioning.

For the week spent on learning how to estimate race in forensic contexts, I wanted to confront some of their preconceived notions on race in the United States through lectures and laboratory exercises. I was hoping to achieve this through a discussion of (1) the sociocultural aspect of race, (2) history of scientific racism, and (3) the use of “race” in biological anthropology and forensic contexts. There were two laboratory exercises on race. The first exercise involved a qualitative scoring of the presence or absence of traits that are stereotypically associated with the skulls of American Black, White and Asian individuals. The second exercise used quantitative measurements that required the students to learn how to use sliding and spreading calipers on standard craniometric measures. Once their case was measured, I helped them enter their data into Fordisc 3.0 and interpret their result. Fordisc 3.0 is the standard statistical software package used in forensic identifications in which a single skull may be compared to males and females of American White and Black, American Indian and Japanese ancestries. In Indiana, 98.8% or six million of its citizens classify as one race according to the 2000 U.S. Census, therefore the students were coerced into translating the combination of features and measurements of their case into one racial category. The cases from India, were meant to illicit further discussion about human variation and the inappropriateness of using race in contexts outside the United States. In Indiana, the 2000 U.S. Census reported approximately 15,000 individuals with an Asian race from India, which accounts for 0.2% of the population.

Objectives and Implementation
In previous classes, I have found that the students had difficulty in assigning race to their cases. This was not due to their lack of experience, since they were able to assign sex and age to their cases with ease. Instead, I felt that they seemed uncomfortable with actually looking for features associated with human variation. Once a student vocally denied being able to see any differences even among groups of living people. Most students defaulted on the notion of the “melting pot” and/or a misinterpretation of the mitochondrial data that suggested that all humankind was recently out of Africa.

The ultimate aim of this course is to train students in the techniques of empirical observation and critical thought. In particular, I wanted the students to confront and reevaluate their own ideas of race/human variation, and then be able to apply the forensic methods and information from the class in developing an interpretation of their case. In order to determine whether my goals had been met, I used a series of learning assessments modeled from (Angelo and Cross 1993)(See Appendix). The assessments were collected as follows:

#1) Assessing Student’s Prior Knowledge
#2) Assessment after the Qualitative Race Exercise
#3) Assessment after the Quantitative Race Exercise
#4) Final Forensic Case Report

It is important to note that between the third assessment and the final report, the students each gave a case presentation. This was meant to give them time to show their case to the class formally, and
to share with us their preliminary results. Each student had 5-10 minutes to present, time for their classmates to ask questions, and time for me to give my opinion of the case. This provided a final platform to think about race. Discussions generated from the cases dealt with the intersection of race, age, sex, socioeconomic status and their association with violence in Indiana and India.

**Results and Reflection**

The interpretation of the data from the first three learning assessments proved to be overly simplistic and not useful in addressing the discrepancies in the understanding and application of race that I was observing in the classroom. However, a coding of responses in the final case report proved rewarding. The case reports included information about their level of confidence in assigning race, whether or not they think race can be measured, and whether it should be measured for forensic identifications.

The learning assessments #1 to #3 gathered anonymous data through only true/false and yes/no responses. The results appear meaningless since there is no explanation as to why the students responded like they did. For example, the number of people who felt that it was true that people may only belong to one racial category decreased from 4 to 2 to 1, while the number of people that considered race to ‘only be skin deep’ appeared to increase from 1 to 3 to 3. However a benefit to these quick assessments was that these very open-ended and common statements on race probably served as prompt to get them to think about these statements in the context of the course.

Assessments #2 and #3 were designed to understand changes in opinion based on the completion of the class exercise. My results suggested that by the time they had their second exercise on race, that their ideas were nearly solidified. After the qualitative exercise, assessment #2 indicated that three students found that it “changed their views race”, while only one student felt that their views changed after the quantitative exercise measured by assessment #3. This was not what I was expecting or desiring from the exercises. I had expected the students to be more surprised by their results and that the exercises would have served to have them reflect on their ideas of race and human variation.

Coding the responses from the forensic case report presented a framework that allowed me to see how the students rationalized their answers in relation to their particular case.

**Ideological Incongruence**

In particular to race, students were supposed to understand the conditions in which a particular suite of physical characteristics would translate to the socially constructed “race” used in the American legal system. This understanding would have been expressed in their case report. Despite class lectures, class exercises and class discussions, many the final papers still presented cliché ideas of race and faulty logic. These were the same kinds of issues that I had encountered in previous classes. Here are the most common problems that students presented in their final case reports:

1) Problems in translating the combination of features into a single U.S. racial category.
   - They classify individuals from the United States of “mixed race” as White.
   - They classify individuals from the United States of Asian ancestry as American Indian, but not Hispanic/Latino.

2) Conflicting ideas in whether race can be measured and whether it should be used in forensic investigations.
The belief in the “melting pot” slogan.
- Emphasis on individual variation.

The maintenance of the “melting pot” discourse embedded in a meritocratic ideology is vital for engaging in culturally and politically acceptable interactions in academic and workplace settings. Angelina Castagno (2008) found that among Utah middle schools, students were socialized to be silent about race. She found that most White educators maintained the illusion that race either doesn’t matter or doesn’t really exist with the focus to be put on the individual (Castagno 2008:134). This individualizing reflex may actually help perpetuate structural racism (Solomona et al. 2005).

Ideological incongruence refers to the dilemma experienced by individuals when their ideological or belief sets are incompatible (Solomona et al. 2005:153). This dilemma was manifested in the student’s contradictory responses about whether race can be described or measured.

In order to further understand whether the conflicting views were due to inexperience or an ethical dilemma, I coded their responses in their forensic report. I compared their reported level confidence to whether they thought race was measureable and whether they thought race should be estimated in forensic investigations. Both confident and unconfident students tended to feel that race could not be measured. Eight out of thirteen students that were confident that their race estimation was correct still felt that race could not be measured. Yet, both confident and unconfident students also tended to feel that race should be estimated in forensic investigations, although there was one student that did not respond. Level of confidence and opinions on measuring race and its use in forensic identification did not differ significantly when Chi-square tests were applied (p>0.05). When the number of students who felt race was measureable and the number of students who felt race should be used in forensic investigations was compared using a Chi-square test, a significantly different pattern emerged.

|   | Is race measurable? | Should race be used in forensic IDs?
<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Chi-square: p=0.029*

If race is not measurable, then why do students feel it should be used in forensic identifications?
Since no significant patterns emerged related to the confidence of the observer, it appears the differences are not due to inexperience or cultural naïveté, but rather highlight ideological incongruence among students in regards to race. The forensic assignment of race presented the students with an ethical dilemma.

**Future Directions**
In the course of the class, I found that there were other mental blocks that the students had in working with their case. One was assigning race and the other was determining the manner of death – I think both of these challenged their worldviews on race, class, violence and justice. Despite a series of classes devoted to these topics and numerous one-on-one conversations, some students seemed to understand, and yet be unwilling to put their feelings on paper.
Bransford and colleagues (2000) acknowledged that sometimes prior knowledge can “guide thinking in the wrong direction” (p.236). This observation applies to this situation in which engrained cultural and personal beliefs clashed with the goals of the project – How could I expect the students to be able to measure race, when they are not supposed to notice it? Trying to go beyond the discourse of denial about race and racism in America will be a challenge I will be facing in future classes.

From these results I am going to improve the clarity of the course goals and be more sensitive to the cultural and personal beliefs that the students carry. In order to allow them to grapple with their beliefs and fulfill the goals of the assignment, I will encourage the final report to be in a narrative style. I will also make sure that they understand that the audience of their paper is a law enforcement group that will be deciding whether to contribute time and funds to the solving the case. I will also include contemporary readings about race construction in the United States. Through these changes, I hope to encourage metacognitive skills to further empower them in the task of identifying their case and the ethical dilemmas that accompany it.

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References Cited


APPENDIX

FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY: S2010 - Learning Assessment #1: Race
The following questions will be used to monitor changes in our view of race. Please answer the following questions with your preconceived notions of race prior to taking this class.

TRUE or FALSE

_________ There are pure races.

_________ Some races are more evolved/advanced than others.

_________ Racial categories are clear-cut.

_________ People may only belong to one racial category.

_________ Race is only skin-deep.

How many races are there? ________

Circle the terms regarding race that you have heard of….

One drop rule  Anti-Miscegenation Laws  Segregation  Melungeon

  Eugenics  Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment

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FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY: S2010 - Learning Assessment #2: Race
After listening to the lecture and estimating the race of your case using qualitative traits, please answer the following…

Did your case have features that are present in multiple racial categories?   Yes / No

Do you feel confident about the race assignment of your case?  Yes / No

Did the American Race Exercise change your views about race?   Yes / No
If so, then what changed?

TRUE or FALSE

_________ There are pure races.

_________ Some races are more evolved/advanced than others.

_________ Racial categories are clear-cut.

_________ People may only belong to one racial category.

_________ Race is only skin-deep.
FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY: S2010 - Learning Assessment #3: Race
After estimating the race of your case using qualitative and quantitative methods, please answer the following…

Were the qualitative and quantitative results consistent for your case? Yes / No

Do you feel confident about the race assignment of your case? Yes / No

Did FORDISC change your views about race? Yes / No
If so, then what changed?

TRUE or FALSE

__________ There are pure races.

__________ Some races are more evolved/advanced than others.

__________ Racial categories are clear-cut.

__________ People may only belong to one racial category.

__________ Race is only skin-deep.

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