



August 10, 2020

### **Statement on Race, Racism, and Diversity in Forensic Anthropology**

In June 2020, an [open letter](#) to the AAFS was signed by approximately 250 forensic scientists [acknowledging](#) the need for forensic organizations to 1) recognize the ongoing structural inequalities and racism that exist in the U.S. criminal justice system and the forensic sciences, and 2) develop a formalized plan to address these issues within our scientific fields. The Society of Forensic Anthropologists ([SOFA](#)) Board of Directors believes that professional organizations can encourage collective action towards change. The Board recognizes that the call for change within forensic science was started by a forensic anthropologist, and that the majority of the signatories to the letter are forensic anthropologists.

The SOFA Board of Directors acknowledges that systemic racism against Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) remains a pervasive condition in America, including in the forensic sciences and forensic anthropology. As forensic scientists, we are committed to ensuring that our practices are scientific and applied equally for all people. Our practice can only improve when we think critically and commit to scientific rigor. In tandem, as anthropologists, we must look to our sister communities who are also calling for and making change, such as the AAA's [Association of Black Anthropologists](#), the [AAPA](#), and the AAPA [IDEAS](#) subcommittee. We acknowledge the work of the AAFS Anthropology section Diversity and Inclusion committee in supporting diversity. We believe that our field can serve as the example for other forensic sciences by addressing the ideas and issues outlined below.

As forensic anthropologists we believe the following:

- Race is social reality. The concept of biological race, however, is a historic artifact of discredited scientific thinking which justified pervasive racist policies and beliefs that still persist today. The ongoing impacts of racism are therefore perpetuated in our practice, including research, casework, academic settings, and conferences, in ways that we are only beginning to recognize and grapple with.
- Research on human bodies and human differences, as well as the scientific practice of ancestry estimation using the phenotypic variation has historic roots in colonial and race-based science. While science has long since shifted away from outdated racial typologies to population-based models, anthropologists have continued to communicate findings to lay public safety and health authorities using the simplistic and fraught terminology of social race. Therefore, as a subfield of biological anthropology, forensic anthropology must strive to not only acknowledge the deficits in our practice borne of these historical factors, but to also identify ways to improve the field and update research paradigms moving forward.

- Anthropology is one of the few social sciences that work at the intersection of STEM and law enforcement. As such, forensic anthropologists are uniquely situated to engage and educate law enforcement and other forensic practitioners regarding phenotypic variation and casework interpretation. We must be cognizant not only in this process of translation and interpretation, but also what is at stake when miscommunication or misrepresentation occurs.

SOFA supports the field of forensic anthropology's critical engagement with race, racism and diversity, with the following examples as goals:

- Generate a sustainable forensic anthropology community that is safe for and supportive of BIPOC colleagues and students in tangible ways
- Raise our awareness of [microaggressions](#), as well as the unconscious use of racially charged language and behaviors in personal interactions, teachings, and communications of research
- Commit to making pathways for BIPOC forensic scientists by increasing access, funding, training and research opportunities, providing mentorship, and pushing for diverse leadership within the discipline
- Create a culture where anthropologists recognize their privilege and promote a space of self-reflexivity, where all members of the community are critical of their language, perspectives and actions
- Create a culture where discussing concerns around the use of race, ancestry, and population affinity is commonplace and inclusive, and which integrates academic perspectives beyond our subfield
- Continue the conversation around how we conceive of and apply ancestry estimations to forensic anthropology casework
- Develop guidelines for discussing ancestry and race with the law enforcement and medical-legal community, including nuances of racial identity, in order to ensure that ancestry estimations are properly applied to investigations.

There is a [real cost](#) to the lack of diversity in forensic anthropology. To shift our current paradigm, our field must build on and support work to move forward in the creation of a scientific and research community that affirms and supports BIPOC individuals as critical and foundational to the development and practice of forensic anthropology. These changes will take time, effort, and contributions from many people and organizations. As an organization of practicing forensic anthropologists, the SOFA Board of Directors shall create a committee focused on the practitioner related needs addressed above. We are committed to listening and collaborating with the various stakeholders in our community and to working together to support diversity in forensic science.

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