Region Does Not Mean “Race”—Reality Versus Convention in Forensic Anthropology

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Abstract

Norman Sauer has posed the rhetorical question: if races do not exist, how come forensic anthropologists are so good at identifying them? The simple answer is that, as members of the society that poses the question, they are inculcated into the social conventions that determine the expected answer. They should also be aware of the biological inaccuracies contained in that “politically correct” answer. Skeletal analysis provides no direct assessment of skin color, but it does allow an accurate estimate of original geographical origins. African, eastern Asian, and European ancestry can be specified with a high degree of accuracy. Africa of course entails “black,” but “black” does not entail African. The significant identifying features of a given region then are stochastically determined and are not the products of natural selection. If they are valuable for purposes of identification, they have no coherent adaptive, that is, biological, significance. Neither individual traits nor a configuration of them associated with a given region have any adaptive significance and thus have no comparative worth. Traits of adaptive value however are not constrained by region and cannot be used to identify “race.”

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A race is a grouping of humans based on shared physical or social qualities into categories generally viewed as distinct by society. First used to refer to speakers of a common language and then to denote national affiliations, by the 17th century the term race began to refer to physical (phenotypical) traits. Modern scholarship regards race as a social construct, that is, a symbolic identity created to establish some cultural meaning. While partially based on physical similarities within groups, race