

LSU FACES Laboratory Statement on Structural Violence

Johan Galtung (1969) first discussed the term ‘structural violence’ to describe the form of violence which occurs indirectly to a group of people rather than directly to an individual. Farmer (2004) introduced the concept to the field of anthropology to capture the harm incurred on peoples with limited access to resources and power. Consequently, the groups affected by structural violence are often delineated by racism and poverty as well as other forms of marginalization. The fields of physical anthropology and anatomy, historically, have taken advantage of already marginalized communities by using their remains for the growth of skeletal collections without explicit consent from the individuals or their families (Muller, Pearlstein, & de la Cova, 2016; Watkins, 2018). This statement addresses the concern of the perpetuation of this historical practice in forensic anthropology, specifically with regard to obtaining donations of human remains to be placed at the Forensic Taphonomy Education and Research Facility (FTERF), which is an outdoor laboratory affiliated with the Louisiana State Police and the Louisiana State University Forensic Anthropology and Computer Enhancement Services (LSU FACES) Laboratory.

The term *unidentified*, regarding human remains, refers to a decedent who does not have an associated social or legal identity (La. R.S. 15:651-662(6-C)). An *identified* decedent is one whose identity has been legally established, and for whom responsibility over final disposition resides with the legal next-of-kin (La. R.S. 9:655). The status of being *unclaimed* refers to the deferral of authority over an identified decedent from the next-of-kin to the local coroner’s office; this status also includes instances where no next-of-kin can be located (La. R.S. 9:1551). *Indigency* refers to an individual’s state of “substantial financial hardship” (La. R.S. 15:175). Lastly, *living donors* refer to individuals who indicate prior to death a desire for their remains to be donated for research or educational purposes.

The LSU FACES Laboratory is collaborating with coroner’s offices across the state of Louisiana to obtain donations of human remains for placement at the FTERF and their subsequent curation at the LSU FACES Laboratory. Donated remains were specifically chosen for this collaboration to minimize continued enactment of structural violence on *indigents*. Thus, living donors and next-of-kin donations are preferred; however, unclaimed remains also may be accepted on a case-by-case basis. Living donors and next-of-kin donations will be explicitly informed that remains will be used for both research and educational purposes. Since research requires sustained consent, the legal next-of-kin (including those of previously unclaimed individuals) may request that remains be released to a funeral home at any point during curation.

Recent research in bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology has discussed structural violence in the context of the acquisition of remains for skeletal collections and taphonomic research facilities (e.g. de la Cova, 2012; Nystrom, 2014; Muller, Pearlstein, & de la Cova, 2016, Winkelmann, 2016; Watkins, 2018; Stephan & Ross, 2018, 2019). Watkins (2018: 171), discussing skeletal collections, writes, “Ultimately, tracing changes in how the collection is used and articulated with other collections over time provides visibility that prevents exacting structural violence through obscuring history.” Considering this statement, the LSU FACES Laboratory will also adhere whenever possible to the “Code of Practice for the Establishment and Use of Authentic Human Skeleton Collections in Forensic Anthropology” suggested by Stephan and Ross (2018). Practices in this code include but are not limited to: specification of obtained consent, curation procedures, and the summary of laboratory security practices. The record created through the enactment of these ethical responsibilities will limit the perpetuation of structural violence against marginalized groups.

This statement offers the visibility and transparency that biological anthropologists are ethically responsible for providing when performing research on human remains and amassing a skeletal collection.

References

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