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# The Psychological Importance of Forensic Identification to Families of Victims of Human Rights Violations

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# The Psychological Importance of Forensic Identification to Families of Victims of Human Rights Violations

## **Abstract**

No one knows how many people are missing in the world. Among cases involving kidnapping, human trafficking, and armed conflicts, even the most scrupulous efforts can never verify the sheer number of missing persons. This mystery is especially true for armed conflicts and human rights abuses as “the reluctance of most states to deal honestly and effectively with this issue” keeps the number unknown (“Missing”). Sadly, a great deal of missing persons are not only missing, but dead and unidentified, often as a result of armed conflicts like genocide, which uses mass graves. Once the mass graves are unearthed, specially trained experts called forensic anthropologists work tirelessly to examine the skeletonized remains to identify and return them to families and hopefully achieve justice for the victims. The forensic identification of victims of human rights violations, while challenging, is important for the psychological healing of victims’ broken families and is ultimately worth the intense effort.

## **Keywords**

Forensic Anthropology, Ambiguous Loss, Genocide, Human Rights

## **Disciplines**

Anthropology | Holocaust and Genocide Studies | Other Anthropology

## **Comments**

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## The Psychological Importance of Forensic Identification to Families of Victims of Human Rights Violations

No one knows how many people are missing in the world. Among cases involving kidnapping, human trafficking, and armed conflicts, even the most scrutinous efforts can never verify the sheer number of missing persons. This mystery is especially true for armed conflicts and human rights abuses as “the reluctance of most states to deal honestly and effectively with this issue” keeps the number unknown (“Missing”). Sadly, a great deal of missing persons are not only missing, but dead and unidentified, often as a result of armed conflicts like genocide, which uses mass graves. Once the mass graves are unearthed, specially trained experts called forensic anthropologists work tirelessly to examine the skeletonized remains to identify and return them to families and hopefully achieve justice for the victims. The forensic identification of victims of human rights violations, while challenging, is important for the psychological healing of victims’ broken families and is ultimately worth the intense effort.

Forensic anthropology is very young, for it was not recognized as a distinct field until around the 1970s “with the establishment of physical anthropology within the American Academy of Forensic Sciences in 1972, and the creation of the American Board of Forensic Anthropology in 1977” (Christensen 2). A forensic anthropologist uses skeletal features of unknown individuals to form a biological profile, including their estimated sex, age, ancestry, stature, and any trauma or other alterations, all of which can be compared to missing persons records to identify them (Christensen 2). The field has been growing rapidly not only in terms of professionalism, but also with the rise of popular crime television programs that feature these abilities, such as *Bones*. While *Bones* depicts a more glorified and unrealistic version of the profession, it does bring awareness to the field and the effort done by the anthropologists.

Additionally, more organizations have been involving forensic anthropology, including the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command – Central Identification Laboratory (JPAC-CIL) and Physicians for Human Rights. JPAC-CIL is a federal laboratory based in Hawaii that performs recovery and identification work of deceased military members in Southeast Asia (Christensen 7). Physicians for Human Rights has done work in numerous countries including Nigeria, Guatemala, and El Salvador, sometimes against that government’s wishes, to “support the fundamental right to know the truth, the right of parents and siblings to find their children, sisters and brothers, and the right of those children to know their very identities” (“PHR”). In addition to the physical identification and return of remains to families,

Physicians for Human Rights advocates that victims of human rights and/or humanitarian law violations have a right to comprehensive justice: the right to know the truth, to acknowledgment, and to have incidents and their experience recorded accurately in order to establish the historical record grounded in science and resistant to revisionism. We advocate for criminal accountability according to internationally recognized standards and for reparation for survivors. “Forensic.”

This work is extremely important in order to restore the balance destroyed by conflicts and ensure that the tragedies these families experienced are not later excused or denied, as was the case with Holocaust deniers.

Although largely disguised or ignored, human rights violations like those seen in the Holocaust are still happening today. Despite the assertion “never again” in reference to the horrors created in the 1940s, history is repeating because nothing is done until it is too late, seen in conflicts from the short but devastating Rwandan genocide in the 1990s to the damage being inflicted currently in Syria. These crimes against humanity are not a new phenomenon; there are even “ancient examples [...] from the Old Testament, when God requests that the Hebrews exterminate the Amalekite tribe: ‘Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, and infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey’ (1 Samuel 15:3)” (Pickover 157). Those

who do manage to survive these genocides, however, experience their own horrors and burdens as they are often separated from family members and remain in agonizing uncertainty, “living in this limbo of not knowing what has happened to someone that you love,” whether they are still alive somewhere or have died (Murphy and Wilson). For many, their only possibility for closure arrives years later through forensic identifications.

This pain of uncertainty has been named “ambiguous loss” by researcher and family therapist Pauline Boss. She explains that ambiguous loss, with its elements of incompleteness and uncertainty, is the most devastating, stressful, and tormenting kind of loss. Boss defines two types of ambiguous loss, but it is the first one that fits the context of physically missing persons. She describes that the “people are perceived by family members as *physically absent* but psychologically present, because it’s unclear whether they are dead or alive,” like in the case of those missing-in-action or “forced disappearances” by governments (Boss, *Ambiguous* 8). This kind of loss complicates the grieving process since the family is stuck in this transitional phase so it cannot end as in a normal grieving process, there are constant fluctuations between hope and despair.

Additionally, this type of ambiguous loss is more debilitating because it disrupts the comfort in believing that the world is fair and just but rather unpredictable and cruel. This disruption means the families “don’t know how to make sense of the situation. They can’t problem-solve because they do not yet know whether the problem (the loss) is final or temporary” (Boss, *Ambiguous* 7). Society also becomes uncomfortable with these unknown circumstances, so

people are denied the symbolic rituals that ordinarily support a clear loss-such as a funeral after a death in the family. Few if any supportive rituals exist for people experiencing ambiguous loss. Their experience remains unverified by the community

around them, so that there is little validation of what they are experiencing and feeling. [...] the absurdity of ambiguous loss reminds people that life is not always rational and just; consequently, those who witness it tend to withdraw rather than give neighborly support, as they would do in the case of a death in the family. Finally, because ambiguous loss is a loss that goes on and on, those who experience it tell me they become physically and emotionally exhausted from the relentless uncertainty. “Boss, *Ambiguous* 8.”

In an ideal world, family’s relentless uncertainty would be solved when their missing loved one is located, identified, and subsequently honored. Sometimes minute pieces of evidence like a bone fragment or tooth are recovered and forensically identified, but there is no resolution for they “could conceivably be taken from living people. Worn out by waiting, however, most families accept what they finally get as theirs to bury. A symbolic closure is better than none at all” (Boss, *Ambiguous* 14). Unfortunately, it is more common that families of missing persons never get even this bit of closure, leaving their loss ever-shifting. Records kept by the party in questions, such as those kept by Nazis, may answer family’s questions but do not lessen their horror or provide relief like forensic identification, retrieval, and burial of victims can.

Unfortunately, there are lots of opportunities for forensic anthropologists to lend their skills to provide relief. For instance, the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939 was a period of political unrest that led to the persecution of the leftwing known as Republicans. People did not know who to trust, and those who remained in their communities were rounded up and either executed right away or taken to jail before execution and disposal in hidden mass graves. Families were told that they would return, and thus began their long wait for their husbands and fathers who never came home. Today, many forensic anthropologists volunteer with the Association for the Recuperation of Historic Memory for the recovery and identification of those who had disappeared during the war and the equally horrific dictatorship that followed. Many days can be spent searching before locating a mass grave, and the uncovering of remains may also take time since more soil has accumulated over the years the grave lay dormant. Once

exhumed, a forensic anthropologist can begin their assessment of age and sex, and later—with the help of laboratory equipment—determine individual characteristics and trauma. In normal circumstances, despite the great passage of time, the bone tissue is in good condition. Their work is also time-sensitive as family members that have been waiting decades are at an advanced age. This decline also poses challenges as memories of witnesses are fading, making identifications complicated if a biological profile does not match any of their descriptions. If there is a positive identification, “the remains are returned to the respective families, upon which a ceremony and burial takes place, providing a final and proper rest” (Ferllini 210), both for the victim and their family.

A similar disturbance occurred in Argentina in 1976, known as the “Dirty War” with extreme, brutal oppression and disappearance of practically all civilians. Families were often shattered, and it became common for women to gather once a week at the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, which was the most oppressed area during the war. They would demand information about their missing children and grandchildren, although only a fraction have been found. For those less fortunate who faced executions throughout the country, search efforts conducted by forensic anthropologists under Argentina’s newer, democratic government face a monumental challenge. One incredible resource created in the effort to help is the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, who have been recognized around the world and have also done work in many countries including Ethiopia, Bolivia, and Chile. They worked in Argentina to compile a database that would “help in the search for and identification of the victims” and better organize and ensure positive identifications of remains (Ferllini 202). They also set up blood banks to gather samples from surviving families to compare their genetic information to unidentified individuals. The search for missing victims has continued and is still in progress,

and Argentinian cemeteries with unidentified graves serve as a testament to the crimes many faced in the late 1970s.

Some crimes have occurred not too long ago, and despite the advancements in technique, more challenges may surface and hinder the identification of victims. In Rwanda, a small country in Central Africa, experienced a horrific genocide against one of their ethnic groups, the Tutsis, beginning in 1994. In just 100 days, it is estimated that around 800,000 people died brutal deaths, where machete-like tools called *pangas*

were used to mutilate, kill, or injure people and stop them from escaping—a victim who attempted to get away would be struck in the ankle area with a panga, severing the Achilles tendon. [making] it impossible for the person to run or walk. “Ferllini 194.”

The United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR) along with Physicians for Human Rights exhumed and attempted to identify the many victims, but they faced bigger obstacles than the typical challenge of locating and identifying remains. This genocide had taken the lives of entire families, so there was no one left to claim the bodies, but the identification itself was jeopardized since no DNA comparisons could be carried out due to a lack of databases against which to test the samples. Another great challenge seen in nations like Rwanda is the impossibility of positive identification by matching dental or medical records since they do not exist. The volunteers took a different route and displayed clothing found in the hope that someone would recognize them, but few were. Despite these set-backs, “the work done in Rwanda made the world aware of the brutality that had taken place [...] and the people who had been killed eventually received a dignified burial” (Ferllini 195), making the difficult work of the volunteers and forensic anthropologists matter nonetheless.

When the chance for a positive identification and return of a victim to their family is possible, the family’s subsequent relief is palpable and the results are a testimony to their



strength and resilience. The return of victims of the Rio Negro Massacre in Guatemala, one of the atrocities committed mainly against people of Mayan descent during a military regime resulted in “proper burial(s), accompanied by Mayan rituals” (Ferllini 198). Despite the Mayan’s previous persecution and the horrors they experienced, they were able to maintain and revive some spirit, in the form of traditional burial practices, thanks to the work of forensic anthropologists. The work of forensic anthropology in human rights cases “has often served as a catalyst for the healing process to begin on both a personal and social level” as family’s grief becomes validated (Ferllini 216). Beyond emotional relief, “survivors and descendants of victims can understand past events, gain monetary compensation, and come to a conclusion as to a person’s fate” (Ferllini 193), all aiding in the resolution of their ambiguous loss.

With advances in technology, many argue DNA testing makes a forensic anthropologist’s biological profile of a victim from skeletal characteristics obsolete. However, A biological profile is still necessary for the identification of the victim because “a DNA profile [...] is only half of what is needed for an identification—it is also necessary to have something with which to compare it” (Christensen 423). Plus, as mentioned is the case in Rwanda, in some cases there are no records to compare—let alone surviving member to create one. In addition, records may not be very detailed and require a biological profile from a forensic anthropologist to narrow the options (Christensen 423).

Past this technical reasoning, people may also hold opinions that the forensic anthropologist’s effort is not necessary for families. The forensic anthropologist’s work is likely undervalued by those who do not need their services. If they have not experienced persecution or do not have missing family, experiencing ambiguous loss and uncertainty, they cannot understand the relief anthropologists are providing to the many people suffering from it around

the world. Ambiguous loss can best be understood by those not experiencing it, as indicated in a scientific study performed by University College London, which found that uncertainty—in their context, knowing there is a small chance of receiving an electric shock—creates much more anxiety than having more confidence in an outcome, even if the outcome is negative (that they will receive a shock). These findings can be applied to understand why people get anxious in their daily lives (*Uncertainty*), which can then be related and amplified to understand the anxiety and negative consequences that can occur from uncertainty about such an important and meaningful part of life: family.

Additionally, some people think that more effort should be put into the aid and prevention of human rights violations in the present and future, rather than reliving the past. However, if the past is ignored it is doomed to happen again. Forensic anthropologists care enough to perform the emotional work of digging through the past and retrieving identities and dignity to victims, for as a quote by Martin Niemöller featured on the last page of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum brochure says,

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me. “*Changed.*”

If the media or at least humanitarians do not bring attention to the atrocities committed and covered up by governments and vicious groups, justice cannot be served and people cannot move on with their lives. If a loved one is missing, people would want those capable of putting in the effort to locate and return them and to help hold those responsible to do so and hold the perpetrators accountable.

Mostly citing cases of newly-identified missing-in-action soldiers, some people have also claimed that returning victim's identities gives the anthropologist's work a political edge and gives the fallen soldiers a likely-unearned air of importance. They believe that the forensic anthropologists are simply executing political agendas and contributing to imagined stories of heroism possibly created by the government to justify military presence in other nations. They think that by "focusing on which stories get told and which remain in the shadows, we demonstrate how exhumations and identifications meet political ends, needs, and agendas and, in the process, produce new or different posthumous identities" (Wagner 238), painting fallen soldiers as more prestigious or important than they were in life; however, the goal and outcome of these identifications is rarely long-lasting honor or prestige. In 1998, The Tomb of the Unknowns was opened and remains placed there in 1984 were taken out and subsequently identified by forensic staff as First Lieutenant Michael J. Blassie, who was then sent home to his family in Missouri for burial. At first, Blassie's family received backlash for their request that The Tomb of the Unknowns be opened and its remains examined, but succinctly put by Michael's sister, "if it's Michael, he is not unknown. He might be unidentified, but he is not unidentifiable. And we want to bring him home" (Wagner 244), highlights how the family's goal is certainly not fame, but the relief and closure that they have been waiting for. Also, the identification of Blassie likely only brought him brief fame as he was no longer an Unknown, and after he was buried his image shifted "from an object of national commemoration to an individual fallen service member with an individual identity, personal history, and network of social relations" (Wagner 242). He would have technically retained more honor and prestige had he remained unidentified.

People also believe that by relentlessly seeking answers to ambiguous loss instead of meaning, families are given false hope thus hindering the chance of reducing the loss' stress and their ability to cope with it (Boss *Family* 78); however, in her first book Boss discussed how any amount of closure can greatly help families and disrupted societies heal. For example, in the wake of the struggle for freedom that cost many lives, South Africa created the Truth and Reconciliation Committee under president Nelson Mandela, which works to exchange amnesty for perpetrators with information about victims for their families. Boss believes that “knowing for sure what happened to a missing child [...] would for many parents be worth granting amnesty. For many, verifying a loss is worth even more than retaliation” (Boss, *Ambiguous* 129). Broken families should not have to give up or settle that they will “never know” when in fact there are many devoted individuals willing to work as forensic anthropologists for their closure, despite the odds.

In his TEDx Talk titled “Embracing Uncertainty” Joshua Bailey asks the question, “if it is part of our neurological predisposition to reject something like uncertainty, then why do we still crave significance, meaning, purpose, and to change the world when there are no guarantees” (“Embracing”). This contradiction is featured in the work of forensic anthropologists as there is no guarantee they will succeed in locating and identifying all remains, yet they work tirelessly to try. There is no fame or fortune to be acquired by this humanitarian work, yet they do it anyway. The anthropologists are not dismayed by the overwhelming amount of cases waiting to be addressed or yet to be created, they are fueled by them. Every bit of work done by forensic anthropologists to help families brings the world a step closer to stopping these horrendous human rights violations, gathering evidence which is then submitted to international crime courts where cases are tried. Some have received justice and so many await their trials

(Ferllini 190). Forensic anthropology is a valued field and their work is not only important to families and nations affected, but to the anthropologists themselves, as it is mutually beneficial because they can feel proud that their work was not in vain since it helps and makes such an impact on people's lives.

The challenging work of forensic anthropology is ultimately paid off by the psychological relief provided to families of and justice brought to the victims of human rights violations. These issues have grown in recognition as there are increased international efforts to utilize forensics in the wake of intense human rights abuses ("Missing"). The return of identities to victims and their subsequent return to their family provides long-awaited certainty of their fate and may allow the family to heal from their damaging ambiguous loss. It also strips some of the horror inflicted by ruthless regimes. The identification and return by forensic anthropologists can also undermine the regime's attempt to damage the victim's lives and the world's humanity, and if enough work is done future attempts can be stopped in their tracks while past ones can be brought to light and justice.

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