



University of Dundee

Commentary on

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Sir or Madam

This letter relates to the recent publication entitled '*Cascading Bias of Initial Exposure to Information at the Crime Scene to the Subsequent Evaluation of Skeletal Remains*' [1] published in this journal. We wish to raise concerns for discussion regarding such an approach to research. Whilst we wholeheartedly acknowledge the importance of bias and the necessity for ongoing research in this domain, there are fundamental methodological flaws that recur within the literature addressing bias across forensic science practice. In this paper, these have resulted in an inappropriate and potentially dangerous extrapolation to the professionalism of a certified forensic community. It is for this reason that we felt it imperative to raise our concerns for discussion within the forensic practitioner community, since this type of research not only impacts on the current discipline under consideration but also on other subjects.

The paper concerned bases its conclusions on research undertaken using unqualified MSc students who are described as having an educational background of '*bioarchaeology/biological and physical anthropology or osteology*' (1). The research subjects involved in this study are therefore utilised inappropriately as proxies for practising forensic anthropologists. Indeed, the authors use the term "nonworking expert" to describe their participants which is

misleading in the context of forensic practice. The use of the term “expert” in reference to students rather than experienced practitioners can and should be questioned.

The profile of the subjects, as described by the authors, is of students who would not be expected to have had training in the requirements which are placed on forensic practitioners, including an awareness of the risks of cognitive bias.

There is also no indication that the students have any practical experience of working on a forensic scenario within the UK criminal justice systems.

According to the authors, the studied cohorts also contained no experienced forensic anthropologists or any students who had studied forensic anthropology therefore rendering invalid any claims regarding relevance to the profession.

We would argue therefore, that suggesting that the results are reflective of practising forensic anthropologists is a gross misrepresentation and an outcome that cannot be verified from the subjects examined. Subsequently, the conclusions cannot be borne out by the results. In short, the only viable conclusion from this research is that inexperienced MSc students who have studied bioarchaeology or physical anthropology, may be biased by contextual information.

We are surprised and disturbed that these issues were not picked up in peer review and brought to the attention of the editor prior to publishing. We would welcome viable studies into bias within the forensic practitioner community, but utilising unqualified students as a proxy is scientifically unacceptable and particularly so when then used to question the professional capabilities of a forensic discipline.

References

1. Nakhaeizadeh S, Morgan RM, Rando C, Dror IE. Cascading bias of initial exposure to information at the crime scene to the subsequent evaluation of skeletal remains. *J Forensic Sci.* 2017;63(2):403-11.

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