

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letter to the Editor—As forensic scientists and as people, we must not confuse objectivity with neutrality

Dear Editor,

Recently, there has been some debate in the forensic science community around issues of importance to all forensic science professionals, that of objectivity and neutrality in our work. This discussion centered around events of great public importance that involve racist attitudes, human rights abuses, and established systems of oppression and violence.

These are relevant issues that can lead to misunderstandings and are therefore worth discussing without prejudice or tropes. The aim of this letter was to clarify the concepts of objectivity and neutrality within the context of forensic science, in order to advance this broader discussion. To be clear, we are separating this discussion from that of bias, as we see these as separate, albeit related, issues as cognitive bias can arise from a number of different factors, to include lapses in objectivity and/or neutrality. Cognitive biases have been shown to affect interpretations within the forensic sciences and that implementing various laboratory protocols can aid in reducing some biases [1,2–4]. We are not juxtaposing bias and objectivity here intentionally; instead, we are hoping to illustrate how there are differences between *objectivity* and *neutrality* and that recognizing these differences can allow forensic science practitioners to engage with their communities in productive ways that are separate from their scientific analyses and professional responsibilities.

1 | What does it mean to be objective in the forensic sciences?

As a scientific activity, performance is guided by the best available evidence. Under these conditions, the reports that result from professional work in the forensic sciences do not depend on the ideology of the expert or their position on the conflict in question.

For example, in some Latin American countries, forensic archeologists and anthropologists are often tasked with finding clandestine graves of victims from forced disappearances resulting from state violence. In such cases, these archeologists and anthropologists analyze the evidence and write and report their findings: They report that these skeletons correspond to some minimum number of individuals with certain biological parameters, whose genetic profiles correspond to those people who were reported as missing. In doing so, they are not expressing a political stance on the incident/conflict/circumstances that cost these victims their lives.

The report is objective. It is based on the documented evidence with verifiable results. The methods used are accepted by the scientific community and validated. In fact, if another professional with a different personal political stance toward the incident/conflict/circumstances of death worked on this case, they would report consistent findings regarding the characteristics of the clandestine burial, which contained a minimum number of individuals with certain biological parameters, whose genetic profiles correspond to those of some people reported missing.

That would be an objective analysis by ethical forensic professionals.

2 | What does it mean to be neutral in forensic sciences?

Forensic sciences are applied in contexts of human catastrophes, conflict, violence, and war. Forensic sciences serve both humanitarian and medicolegal causes. There is no doubt that we must respond with as much professionalism and objectivity as possible (in ways that minimize cognitive bias).

However, this is not the same as being neutral.

Just think of the forensic pathologist who must examine and prepare a report on a woman who is the victim of a sexual assault and homicide. The expert's report must describe and document the findings and, based on them, draw conclusions. This is a technical task based on the objective methodology.

Of course, it would be absurd to think that this victim must not provoke emotions in the forensic professional. However, it would be wrong and unjustifiable for empathy and subjective elements to intrude on their findings, just as it would be wrong for forensic professionals to be indifferent to human suffering.

Within this debate in the forensic science community, it has been intimated that expressing a position on a matter of social interest can reveal a conflict of interest that prevents the forensic professional from acting in a certain case. However, it seems incongruous to maintain, for example, that a forensic scientist who is against torture should be prevented from examining an alleged victim of torture. Should this report be commissioned by a professional who declares himself neutral against the practice of torture? Should the analysis of an alleged victim of child sexual abuse be in the hands of someone who declares themselves neutral on the practice of pedophilia?

It is very clear that forensic professionals must not hide our position on issues that constitute minimum moral standards for humanity. This does not make one an activist, nor does it render someone's objective report inadmissible. The Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the international community in 1948 is one example of these minimum standards and is a baseline reference document in the Ethical Principles of the Iberoamerican Network of Legal Medicine and Forensic Science Institutes [5]. Racism is a breach of these standards, as is the abusive use of force and violence by state security forces.

What all of this means is that as professionals, we must be objective (including those of us who work for neutral organizations); and as human beings, we must not be neutral, nor should we be expected to be neutral in the face of horrific, violent acts. Forensic scientists must be methodical and objective. We must follow relevant codes of ethics, and those codes should reflect a requisite need for objectivity and professionalism. However, in the need to be objective, we must not confuse objectivity with neutrality.

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