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ATTITUDES OF SERBIAN BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS TOWARD THE CONCEPT OF RACE

ABSTRACT: The status of the concept of race in modern biological anthropology is not clear. While in some countries (e.g. in the USA, Australia and most of Western Europe) the majority of biological anthropologists favour the non-racial approach to the study of human variation, in others (e.g., China and most of Eastern Europe), racial approach, both populational and typological, is still utilized. In addition to the fact that human variation is a complex subject and almost by its very nature lends itself to different interpretations, it has been shown in a number of studies that the ways in which human biological variation is conceptualised is highly dependent on the socio-political context and the way the anthropological community is functioning within this broader framework. This study reports the results of a questionnaire based survey focusing on the attitudes of Serbian biological anthropologists towards the concept of race. It was found that the majority of respondents still accept the race concept. It is hypothesized that this is for a variety of reasons, including the development of the discipline in relative isolation from the centres of excellence in bio-anthropological research, lack of appropriate academic infrastructure and research funding. Further research, including surveys of academic communities in other countries and research traditions might throw more light on the elusive subject of the status of the concept of race in biological anthropology.

KEY WORDS: Race - Biological anthropology - Attitudes - Serbia

INTRODUCTION

Race has been one of the key concepts in biological (physical) anthropology since this discipline's inception as an independent field of study. While human biological variation was discussed as early as in

the works of Greco-Roman scholars (Kennedy *et al.* 2013), the concept of race emerged only in the early stages of European exploration and with the re-birth of Western science (Brace 2005, Livingstone 2008, Sussman 2014). The concept was articulated during the Age of Enlightenment in the works of anatomists and

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naturalists such as Carl von Linné and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. Blumenbach, who is now seen as the founding figure of modern biological anthropology, noted in his classic, *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, that there are no clearly defined boundaries between different groups of humans. He emphasised that "no variety [race] exists, whether of colour, countenance, or stature, &c., so singular as not to be connected with others of the same kind by such an imperceptible transition, that is very clear they are all related, or only differ from each other in degree" (Blumenbach 1865, 264). This view highlighted the weaknesses of simple pigeonholing classificatory strategies, however, it did not have much resonance among the students of human variation and in the subsequent years the race concept emerged in the typological approach. This essentialist approach focuses on average values, "disregards variation and considers the members of a population to be replicas of the type" (Mayr 2002, 291).

Discussion of the concept of race was present in some early histories of social and cultural anthropology (Haddon 1910, Penniman 1965). Criticism of racism became a mainstream in the discipline, with the influence of Franz Boas in the early twentieth century (Lewis 2001, Eriksen, Nielsen 2013). By the mid-nineteenth century, racism had already been rejected by early ethnologists like James C. Pritchard (Bošković 2010). This has gradually led to the consensus in social and cultural anthropology that the concept of race has "negligible importance in shaping human nature" (UNESCO Statement on Race, quoted in Eriksen, Nielsen 2013, 97). At the same time, contemporary social anthropologists like Peter Wade (2004) argue that race is "a cultural construction," while some others, like Cowlshaw (2000), claimed that this concept is much more widespread than anthropologists would like to admit. As a matter of fact, it should be noted that a number of social and cultural anthropologists have somewhat shifted their ideas since the original UNESCO Statement (Lévi-Strauss 1992, xiii, Latour 2004, 457, Bošković 2006, 563).

Within the typological program of biological anthropology, numerous systems of racial classification appeared, often implying the existence of racial hierarchies. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these classifications were strongly underpinned by European nationalism as well as escalating imperialist and colonial political agendas. Typology dominated the study of human biological variation deep into the twentieth century and its

influence is still felt even in the twenty-first century (Brown, Armelagos 2001). Racial hierarchies and racism were strongly questioned in several seminal works in the period between the world wars (e.g., Huxley *et al.* 1935, Hirschfeld 1938).

With the end of the Second World War, deeply affected by the crimes committed in the war, many of which were justified by "racial science," as well as the developments in biological sciences, particularly genetics, many scientists adopted strong antiracist stances and argued against racial hierarchies. They also began to question the typologically grounded concept of race. While some scientists argued that the race concept should be completely abandoned as useless in describing and understanding human variation, some thought that it should simply be reconceptualised through the introduction of a populational instead of a typological program (Montagu 1964, Caspari 2018). In the 1960s numerous, rather heated debates ensued on the status of the race concept (e.g. Montagu, 1964, Mead *et al.* 1969). While at first it was not clear if any of the several alternative approaches to the study of human variation outweighed the others, in the ensuing decades the non-racial approach seemed to start to prevail. This was corroborated by a number of studies completed in the USA – analysis of textbooks and research papers as well as surveys of working anthropologists (e.g. Littlefield *et al.* 1982, Lieberman 1989, 1999, 2003, Cartmill 2003). Indeed, in a recent paper focusing on significant divisions between cultural/social anthropologists on the one hand and biological anthropologists on the other, Kuper and Marks noted that the issue of race is one where there is mutual agreement between the two groups. They noted that members of two big American anthropological associations comprising most of the cultural/social and biological anthropologists were "not fundamentally divided" when agreeing that "nothing corresponding to the zoological subspecies exists within extant *Homo sapiens*" (Kuper, Marks 2011, 167).

However, studies carried out in other regions suggested that in some countries such as China and a large number of Eastern European countries ("Eastern Europe" here is not used as a geographical term, but to refer to the former "people's democracies" – Bošković, 2014, Bošković 2016), "race" seems to be "alive and well" (e.g., Kaszycka, Štrkalj 2002, Wang *et al.* 2003, Lieberman *et al.* 2004, Štrkalj 2007, Kaszycka *et al.* 2009). The reasons for this persistent heterogeneity of approaches in the study of human variation, and even the retention of some of the

out-dated concepts such as the typological understanding of race, are numerous and of varying nature. In addition to the fact that human variation is a complex subject and almost by its very nature lends itself to different interpretations, it has been shown in a number of studies that the ways in which human biological variation is conceptualised is highly dependent on the socio-political context and the way the anthropological community is functioning within this broader framework.

To better understand this persistence of racial thinking in anthropology, further investigations of scientists and their attitudes are needed (Goodman 2017). As previous surveys suggested considerable differences among scientists in different countries, further probing into these different research traditions might provide valuable information. The aim of this study was to investigate the attitudes of Serbian anthropologists toward the concept of race. Although relatively rarely producing research of international repute, biological anthropology in Serbia has a relatively long tradition going back to the beginning of the twentieth century, and at times engaged a significant number of practitioners (Vlahović 2010). It developed in complex social and political circumstances, characteristic for this part of Southeastern Europe, within different countries, changing historical circumstances and political systems.

In a recent survey of European anthropologists, Serbia, based on a relatively small sample of respondents, was highlighted as one of the countries in which the race concept still seems to be accepted (Kaszycka, Štrkalj 2009). It was hypothesised here that the current survey, carried out on a bigger sample of biological anthropologists, would corroborate the results of the previous study. The results might help understand not just the status of the race concept in Serbia and the reasons behind it, but might also throw more light on the same subject in other relatively small anthropological communities and countries, as well as at the global level.

METHODS

A questionnaire based survey was carried out, focusing on the Serbian biological anthropologists' attitudes toward the concept of race. The survey was completed at the annual meeting of the Anthropological Society of Serbia (ASS) – *Antropološko*

Društvo Srbije. Although this is not specified in the society's name, this is an association of biological anthropologists, with only a marginal representation of cultural anthropologists. The ASS was formed in 2007 as a continuation of the now defunct Anthropological Society of Yugoslavia, established in 1956 (Vlahović 2010). In the year when this survey was conducted the ASS had 136 registered members, based in Serbia (there is also a number of foreign members). The society holds annual meetings – the ASS Congress, and selected papers are published in the ASS's official journal – *Glasnik Antropološkog Društva Srbije (GADS)*. The current survey was carried out during the 49th ASS Congress, held in the spa of Vrdnik in North-West Serbia in 2010.

Attending the ASS Annual Meeting are the research active members of the society, mainly university academics, members of research institutes and their students. Thus they represent the society's most active group and the most influential biological anthropologists in the country; however, a small number of influential anthropologists who are based at the University of Belgrade at the Departments of Anatomy (focusing on forensic anthropology) and Archaeology (focusing on bioarchaeology), have not been attending the meetings. The ASS Annual Congress is a scientific meeting with international participation, most of the foreign attendees being from the four neighbouring countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Montenegro.

A questionnaire was designed, based on the questionnaires used in similar previous studies (cf. Kaszycka *et al.* 2009). The questionnaire comprised of two parts. The first part was aimed at gathering biographical data: age, gender, highest qualification and the institution where it was obtained as well as current place of employment. The second part contained questions relating to participants' attitudes towards the concept of race. Respondents were asked if they agree with the following statement "There are biological races (in any of its definitions) within the species *Homo sapiens*" and were offered three answers, "yes," "no" and "cannot answer". Those who agreed with the statement were further asked how they understand "race" with the four answers offered: "subspecies," "population," "ethnic group" and "other, please specify". Participants were also given an opportunity to make a comment on any aspect of the questionnaire.

Dependence between respondent's view of the existence of biological races and their highest degree received, age-category, home institution (university vs.

all others), gender and field were tested using chi-square tests. The same tests were performed on a subset of respondents (vast majority) who believed in the concept of biological race. Differences in age among groups with different understandings of biological races (subspecies, population, ethnic group) were also assessed using analysis of variance.

RESULTS

The survey was completed by 42 respondents (31% of all ASS members from Serbia). Respondents have made occasional omissions and errors in the survey – for example, one respondent did not provide his age; one respondent has not checked highest degree obtained, etc. (full list of these omissions can be obtained upon request).

All but one respondent answered the question on whether biological races exist. One respondent has written a comment that "clearly there exist Black, Yellow, White... race" which essentially means he embraced the answer that biological races do exist. Therefore, this respondent's answer was appropriately recoded. The analyses reported below were performed for subsamples

of individuals who have appropriately answered all relevant questions. Thus the number of such individuals slightly varies depending on the analysis. Although the number of respondents is small, it presents a large proportion of the total population of interest. Therefore, standard statistical analyses performed below essentially underestimate validity of results.

In general, out of 42 respondents, 83% agreed, 7% disagreed and 10% found it hard to tell whether the statement "There are biological races (in any of its definitions) within the species *Homo sapiens*" is true. The responses broken down by highest degree received, age-category, home institution (university vs. all others), gender and field are presented in Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1–5.

Chi-squared tests have revealed all these associations to be insignificant except for association between field and highest degree obtained. The values for chi-squared statistic for the association between the view of the existence of "race" and highest degree-received, age-category, home institution, gender and field were 13.85, 1.10, 2.15, 0.20, and 5.31, respectively, with associated degrees of freedom of 4, 4, 2, 2 and 8, respectively and associated p-values of <0.01, 0.89, 0.34 0.90, 0.72, respectively. The only variable associated

TABLE 1: Proportions of different views on race of Serbian anthropologists by highest degree received, age, home institution and gender.

	Highest Degree Received			Age (years)			Institution		Gender	
	BSc / BA	MSc / MA	PhD	30–44	45–59	60–78	University	Other	Male	Female
Agree	3	9	19	15	14	5	20	12	14	20
Disagree	0	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2
Cannot tell	3	0	1	2	1	1	1	3	2	2
Total (N)	6	11	21	18	16	7	23	16	17	24
%	16	29	55	44	39	17	59	41	41	59

TABLE 2: Proportions of different views on race of Serbian anthropologists by field.

	Field				
	Biological Anthropology	Cultural Anthropology	Human Genetics	Medicine	Other
Agree	10	1	2	11	8
Disagree	2	0	0	0	1
Cannot tell	0	0	0	2	2
Total	12	1	2	13	11

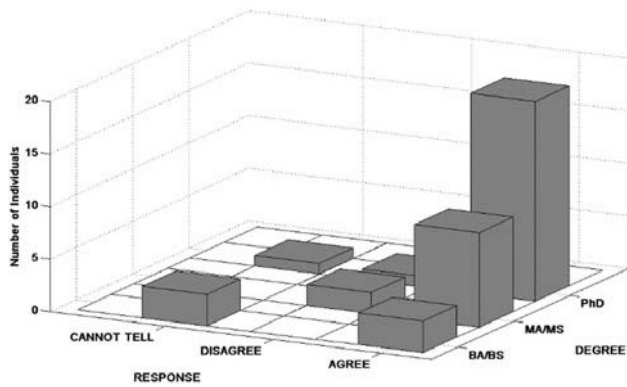


FIGURE 1: Responses highest degree obtained.

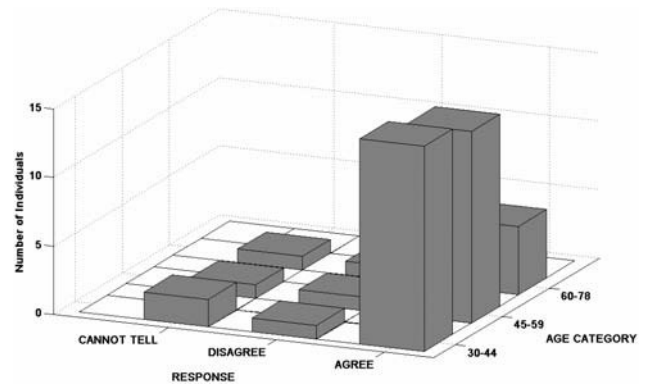


FIGURE 2: Responses by age category.

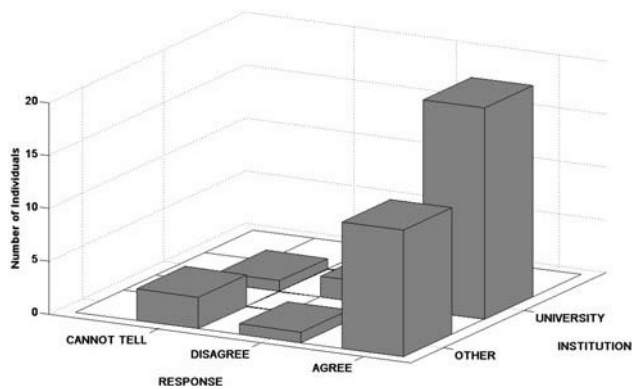


FIGURE 3: Responses by home institution.

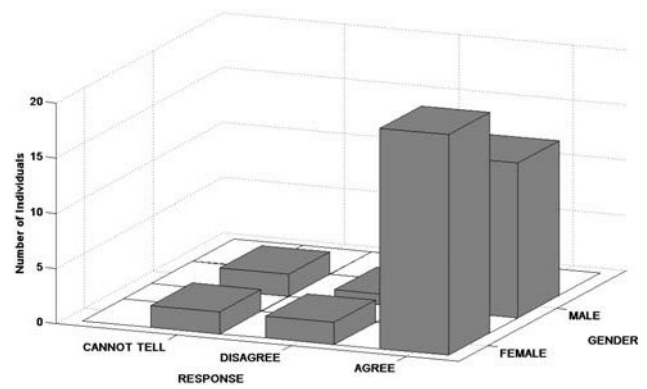


FIGURE 4: Responses by gender.

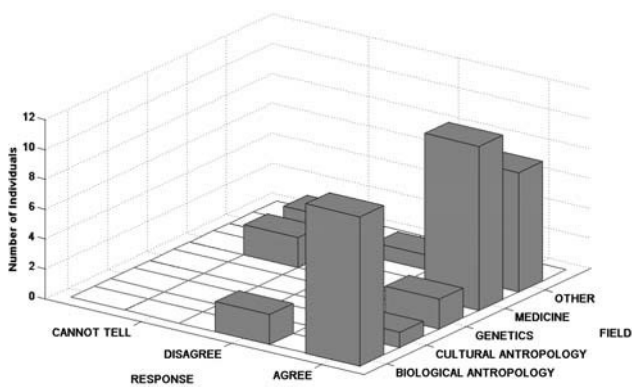


FIGURE 5: Responses by field of specialization.

with one's view of race that was statistically significant was that of highest degree obtained. Contrast tests reveal that this relationship is driven by BSc/BA group compared to the other two groups and is due to the relatively large (3 out of 6) number of respondents in

the BSc/BA group who chose the answer "cannot tell". Since the number of respondents in this group is very small, this finding presents but a minor tweak in the overall pattern.

There is a somewhat pronounced relationship between age and education. The analysis of variance showed a significant difference in average age between the three groups ($F=9.59, p<0.01$) due to the fact that respondents with PhDs are significantly older than respondents in the other two groups (Table 3). For the ease of some presentations and analyses, respondents were broken into three approximately equal age intervals: 30–44, 45–59 and 60–78 years.

The fact that a vast majority (35 out of 42) of surveyed respondents believe in the concept of biological race, provided an opportunity to carry out an analysis of their understanding of the concept. The breakdown of understanding of race by degree, age, institution, gender and field is provided in Tables 4–5 and Figure 6.

TABLE 3: Age of respondents by highest degree received. *The total number of respondents is greater than sum of the parts because information on degree is missing for one respondent.

	N	Mean	S.D.	Median	Range
B. A/B. Sc	6	37.8	7.33	35.0	30-50
M.A/M.Sc	10	40.5	9.11	38.0	30-57
PhD	21	54.5	11.49	56.0	38-78
Medical specialty	3	49.0	8.62	48.0	42-57
Total	41*	48.1	12.08	46.0	30-78

Chi-squared tests have revealed all these associations to be insignificant except for association between age-category and response. The values for chi-squared statistic for the highest degree-received, age-category, home institution, gender and field were 4.97, 13.26, .916, 3.01, 5.85 respectively; with associated degrees of freedom of 6, 6, 3, 3 and 12, respectively, and associated p-values of 0.55, 0.04, .82, .39, and .92, respectively.

TABLE 4: Understanding of race by degree, age, institution and gender.

	Highest Degree Received			Age (years)			Institution		Gender	
	BSc / BA	MSc / MA	PhD	30-44	45-59	60-78	University	Other	Male	Female
Subspecies	1	2	9	2	6	3	6	5	6	5
Population	1	5	6	7	7	1	8	5	6	9
Ethnic group	1	1	3	6	0	0	4	2	1	5
Other	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
Total (N)	3	9	18	15	14	4	19	12	13	20

TABLE 5: Understanding of race by field.

	Field				
	Biological Anthropology	Cultural Anthropology	Human Genetics	Medicine	Other
Subspecies	4	0	1	4	2
Population	5	1	1	3	4
Ethnic group	1	0	0	3	2
Other	0	0	0	1	0
Total (N)	10	1	2	11	8

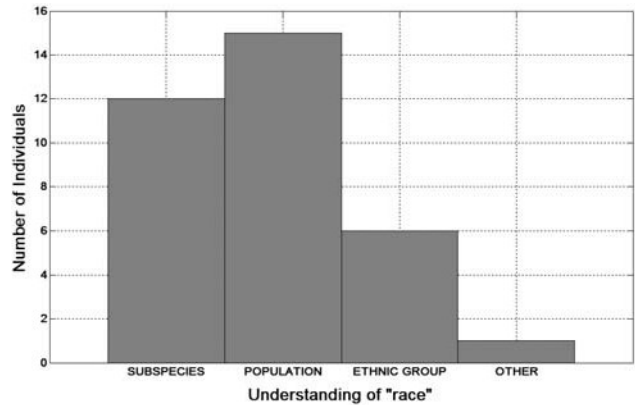


FIGURE 6. Understanding of race.

Going back to the original (continuous) value of age, analysis of variance reveals a close to significant relationship between understanding of race and age ($F=2.70, p<0.06$). This is due to the fact that respondents who see "race" as an "ethnic group" tend to be, overall, somewhat younger (mean age: 39.0) than those who see it as a population (mean age: 47.3) and subspecies (mean age: 53.6).

DISCUSSION

The results of this survey are unequivocal – Serbian biological anthropologists overwhelmingly accept the concept of biological race as a tool for the study of human variation. No factor measured in this survey makes a discernible difference in respect to this attitude. These findings stand in sharp contrast to the results of the studies surveying anthropologists in the countries of North America and Western Europe, where biological anthropologists have been the most productive and making the most significant breakthroughs in recent decades (Štrkalj 2007). However, the results of the current study are similar to those obtained in China and the countries of Eastern Europe (Kaszycka, Štrkalj 2002, Wang *et al.* 2002, 2003, Lieberman *et al.* 2004, Štrkalj 2007, Kaszycka *et al.* 2009). It could be argued that in the latter countries biological anthropologists did not assimilate some of the new ideas (such as non-racial understanding of human variation) which have originated in the fast developing research programs in the West. This could have happened for a number of reasons including a politically induced lack of communication between the East and West and a lack of support and funding in real socialist economies and developing countries for research without immediate practical application, which is still felt in many places.

The foundations for the study of biological anthropology in Serbia were set with the arrival of Slovenian historian Niko Županič (also spelled Županić and Zupanić) to Belgrade in 1907. Županič (who will later help establish the first Ethnographic Museum, as well as be the first Chair and Professor of Ethnology at the University of Ljubljana – Bošković 2015) studied history in Vienna, specialized in anthropology in Munich, and was a member of the Viennese Anthropological Society. He "became Serbia's first scholar in physical anthropology" (Promitzer 2010, 152). Županič's ideas on race are expressed in a lengthy article on "historical anthropology of the Balkan peoples" (Županič 1907, 1908). In this work, he emphasizes the importance of studying "anatomy and physiology" in order to better understand different populations (Županič 1907, 167). In an attempt to combine empirical (measurements of skulls and skeletal remains) and historical accounts, Županič (1907) provides arguments that the original population of the area was blonde, related to Aryans, which supports his claim that Serbs "of all the Yugoslav tribes," as he put it, were most closely related to

Illyrians (Županič 1908, 46). Županič's interest in race serves primarily to justify a certain political hierarchy of the peoples in the area, with Serbs, Croats and Slovenians being basically descendants of the Nordic/Aryan races. This also led him into research on "ethnogenesis" – a concept that fascinated local ethnologists. It was the quest for origins and anthropological justification of "nations" that proved to be an essential component of his work, as he volunteered with the Serbian Army in the First World War, and later was a member of the delegation of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes at the Peace Treaty talks (Milosavljević 2013). However, despite his publications and praise by local scholars – especially by archaeologists – Županič's influence was limited. He was hired in the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade in 1914, to the post of "anthropological clerk" (Serbian: *antropološki činovnik*) – equivalent to what today would be a curator. His task was "to measure Serbian people, and then other peoples living in the Balkan peninsula" (Milosavljević 2013, 717). The outbreak of the First World War and his subsequent going into exile with the Serbian government temporarily interrupted his research agenda. After the War, he was a member of the Yugoslav delegation at the peace conference in Versailles, and, following a brief stint as a minister in the government (1922/1923), he went to Slovenia, where he became the first Director of the newly established Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana, in 1923.

Serbian biological anthropology was at its peak during the period between the World Wars, when research on the number of subjects relating to human biology was carried out at several institutions. The research on human variation was carried out within the typological approach and this approach seems to have survived even as it has diminished in other research traditions. Indeed, some Serbian anthropologists, such as Branimir Maleš (also spelled Males), who immigrated to Argentina after the communists came to power in Yugoslavia, were after the Second World War among the most persistent defenders of the typological approach (Males 1951). Continuing some of the scholarly themes introduced by Županič, the main focus was on "racial" structure and origins of the local populations of the newly established state of Yugoslavia. This focus on local populations and their "racial profile" seem to have persisted up until the present day. Ideas from biological anthropology were, in the period between the two world wars, part of

a discourse on race and racial hierarchies in Yugoslavia in which scientific, pseudoscientific, political and nationalistic ideas become complexly intertwined (Yeomans 2005). However, after the war, the political system of Yugoslavia changed (following the communist revolution) and Serbian biological anthropology went into decline, as the adherence to the Marxist-inspired program of dialectical materialism became more important than the adoption of the rapidly evolving methodology in biological anthropology. A small number of anthropologists continued research, mainly within the confines of the typological program, often producing rather obsolete research (Kohn 1995). Very few of these scientists had international collaborators or had studied abroad. When they did, this was either in countries of the "communist block" (e.g., Poland, Soviet Union, China) or, curiously, in Germany, a rare example of a Western country in which the racial approach persists up until the present day. This collaborative pattern started to change only recently, in the last few decades and on a relatively small scale. In addition, funding for research in biological anthropology has been poor, heightened by the economic crisis induced by the civil war in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Indeed, a lack of funding seems to have been one constant in the history of discipline in Serbia.

In this context a comparison with neighbouring Croatia, where, according to the previous research, a majority of biological anthropologists abandoned the concept of race (Kaszycka *et al.* 2009), might be instructive. The bio-anthropological research in Croatia was much more advanced in the post Second World War era and it flourished subsequent to Croatia attaining independence from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s (in Scopus based SCImago rankings for 2010, and using the h-index as a criterion, Croatia is ranked 29th and Serbia 67nd in the category "Anthropology"; the same ranking is found for the period 1996–2018; bearing in mind that SCImago ranking method does not distinguish between cultural/social and biological anthropology, the difference in rankings for biological anthropology alone might be even greater – see below). The key for this success, concentrated mainly at the Institute of Anthropological Research in Zagreb, was in extensive international collaboration, particularly with countries that have advanced research in biological anthropology (Rudan *et al.* 2002). This collaboration has included common projects, exchange as well as studying and specializing in foreign centres of excellence.

Results of the current survey provide further insights when one looks at the specific understanding of "race" among those Serbian biological anthropologists who believe in its existence. Here, the meaning of "population" comes first, followed by "subspecies" and "ethnic group". While race defined as population signals acceptance of population thinking, understanding it as a subspecies is a clear sign of an out-dated approach. The reason for equating "race" with "ethnic group" seems to be particularly worrying as it can be interpreted as conflating biological with classification based on social and cultural criteria. Looking at a more basic level, seeing race as an ethnic group might be a result of research interests. As even a cursory scan of the research papers published in *GADS* reveals, the main focus of interest of Serbian biological anthropologists is the local population (most often divided into different ethnic groups, e.g., Serbs, Croats, Hungarians, Slovaks). This research covers a wide range of subjects and disciplines, including body composition, biological variation, sports sciences, forensics and auxology.

In some previous samples (e.g. Kaszycka, Štrkalj 2002), there was a strong relationship between age and education. In this sample of Serbian anthropologists, the relationship also exists but is much less pronounced. Age, however, seems to be somewhat related to the attitudes towards race. It appears that compared to older respondents, younger respondents are more likely to see "race" as "ethnic group". One of the reasons is to be found in the aforementioned research focus but perhaps also in the lack of sufficient background in biological anthropology resulting in inadequately prepared practitioners entering the discipline. Significantly, there are no undergraduate programs in biological anthropology in Serbia (in contrast to cultural/social anthropology where, for example, the University of Belgrade alone has the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology comprising of no less than 29 academic staff members). Postgraduate studies are offered at different universities and programs. They recruit candidates graduating in medicine (including allied medicine), biology and archaeology. In addition, some of the scientists who obtained their postgraduate degrees in medical or biological fields, carry out research in biological anthropology. These facts seem to indicate a lack of appropriate educational background in biological anthropology among its practitioners.

It could be argued that the Serbian biological anthropology is in a serious need of modernisation.

This, it would appear, could be noted for many other countries in Eastern Europe and developing countries in general, as well as some of the developed countries where anthropology has historically been rooted in typological and racial thinking. Better integration and collaboration with centres of research excellence and engaging in common projects might be a way forward. Educating students at both under and postgraduate level in these centres of excellence would be particularly valuable. Apart from these strategic changes some smaller steps could also be profitable. One of these might be changing out-dated "racial" terminology in both scientific and popular discourse. It was emphasised in a recent paper on the race concept in human genetics that "scientific journals and professional societies should encourage the use of terms like 'ancestry' and 'population' to describe human groupings in genetic studies and should require authors to clearly define how they are using such variables" (Yudell *et al.* 2016, 565). Both these terms seem to be more flexible and non-comital than "race". Thus, "an individual can have ancestry from multiple geographical regions, and the concept of ancestry is flexible enough that those regions could be local (e.g., southwestern Nigeria) or much broader (e.g., all of Africa)" (Bolnick 2008, 80–81, Jorde, Wooding 2004). While substitution of technical terms is not enough for a transformation of racial into non-racial thinking it should be borne in mind that "language matters, and the scientific language of race has a considerable influence on how the public (which includes scientists) understands human diversity" (Yudell *et al.* 2016, 565).

The concept of race seems to be at the same time "both too broad and too narrow a definition of ancestry to be biologically useful" (Feldman *et al.* 2003). Although a large number of anthropologists has adopted this simple theoretical statement and has used it as a guiding principle in their research programs, the concept of race seems to be uncritically accepted within many research traditions. It appears that it might take a considerable amount of time to produce scientific and social change which will facilitate a transition to a scientifically sound and comprehensive way of conceptualising biological human variation.

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