AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ACCURACY AND RELIABILITY OF SKULL-PHOTO SUPERIMPOSITION IN A SOUTH AFRICAN SAMPLE

BY

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Pretoria, Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or any examination in any other University.

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24th day of June 2011
Table of Contents
List of Figure iv
List of Tables vi
Abstract viii
Abstrak ix
Acknowledgments x
Dedication xii

Chapter 1. Introduction
1.1. General 1
1.2. Aims and objectives of the study 11
1.3. Hypothesis 12
1.4 Importance of the study 12

Chapter 2. Literature review
2.1. Trends in Forensic Anthropological identification 14
2.2. The history of craniofacial identification and photographic superimposition 17
2.3. Skull-photo superimposition: How the technique is carried out in the United States vs. South Africa 26
2.4. The accuracy of skull-photo superimposition 31
   2.4.1. The role of photography in skull-photo superimposition and identification 34
   2.4.2. The use of anatomical/ craniofacial landmarks in skull-photo superimposition 35
   2.4.3. Forensic sciences, evidence and the legal system 37
   2.4.4. Skull-photo superimposition for exclusion or inclusion purposes 44

Chapter 3. Materials and methods
3.1. Introduction 46
3.2. Materials 46
   3.2.1. The Pretoria Bone Collection 46
   3.2.2. Sample collection 48
3.3. Methods 50
   3.3.1. Stage 1 50
      3.3.1.1. Photograph capturing procedure 50
      3.3.1.2. Skull scanning procedure 50
      3.3.1.3. Development of skull-photo superimposition technique 53
   3.3.2. Stage 2 of the skull-photo superimposition study 53
      3.3.2.1. Superimposition procedure 54
   3.3.3. Stage 3 of the skull-photo superimposition procedure 56
      3.3.3.1. The craniofacial landmarks 56
      3.3.3.2. Procedure for superimposition using landmarks 62
      3.3.3.3. Criteria for matching of landmarks between the skull and photograph 63
Chapter 4. Results

4.1. Stage 1
4.2. Stage 2
4.3. Stage 3
4.4. Comparison of stage 2 and stage 3 results
4.5. The overall success of using stage 2 and stage 3 combined
4.6. Repeatability study
4.7. Difficulties experienced with the results

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of results
5.2. Limitations of the study
   5.2.1. Photography
   5.2.2. The use of landmarks in skull-photo superimposition
   5.2.3. The scanned images of the skulls
   5.2.4. The manual method and the new 3-dimensional method: a comparison
   5.2.5. The use of edentulous skulls
5.3. Skull-photo superimposition: transferability of the technique
5.4. Skull-photo superimposition: Inclusion versus exclusion and the legal ramifications thereof
   5.4.1. Inclusion versus exclusion
   5.4.2. The legal ramifications of skull-photo superimposition
5.5. Future recommendations for the use of skull-photo superimposition in South Africa

Chapter 6. Conclusion

References

Appendix
List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Scene where the body was found. Note the burning in the area. 2

Figure 1.2. Close up picture of how the body was observed in the shallow grave. 2

Figure 1.3. The appearance of the remains after removal from the shallow grave. 4

Figure 1.4. The victim lying on her left side, skeletonised, with African hair present. 4

Figure 1.5. Results of the skull-photo superimposition (left), and a recent school of the young girl shortly before her murder (right). 5

Figure 1.6. Results of skull-photo superimposition- top to bottom sweep identifying bony areas that match. 6

Figure 1.7. Results of skull-photo superimposition- left to right sweep midline identifying bony areas that match. 6

Figure 1.8. Results of skull-photo superimposition- left to right sweep lateral one third of face identifying bony areas that match. 7

Figure 3.1. The process of 3D scanning a skull. 51

Figure 3.2. The measurement used to estimate the distance between the mandible and maxilla in an edentulous skull. The measurement is shown with the arrows. 52

Figure 3.3. The imported images in 3D Studio Max. The scanned image of the skull is shown on the left, and the photograph of the matching individual on the right. 54

Figure 3.4. The four views seen in Studio Max. The top right view is the view used to carry out the superimposition. Whilst movements are made in the top right view, the same movements can be seen in the other views but from a different perspective i.e. from the top, or from the side (laterally). 55

Figure 3.5. Anatomical landmarks of the skull/ Craniometric landmarks (anterior view). 57

Figure 3.6. Anatomical Landmarks of the Skull/ Craniometric landmarks (lateral view). 58

Figure 4.1. The morphological match of a photograph and skull. Note the contours of the skull (parietal bones of skull) fit within the face of the photograph, the eyes fit within the orbits, the nose fits over the nasal aperture and the contour of the mandible follows that of the jaw line in the photograph. 70

Figure 4.2. Landmark based matching of skull and photograph using 10 72
landmarks: practice with placing the landmarks and matching skulls to photographs using landmarks. The blue dots are the photograph landmarks and the white dots are the skull landmarks.

**Figure 4.3.** Group match. The match between photograph and skull using the landmarks- with the skull and photograph visible. The blue dots are the photograph landmarks and the white dots are the skull landmarks.

**Figure 4.4.** Dot match. The match between photograph and skull using the landmarks- the skull and photograph not visible. The blue dots are the photograph landmarks and the white dots are the skull landmarks. The red circles indicate the orientation landmarks, the green circles indicate the primary landmarks and the yellow circles indicate the secondary landmarks.

**Figure 4.5.** 6231 Skull ‘g’ Morphological matching. This superimposition is an example of a positive match for stage 2 of the study.

**Figure 4.6.** 6231 Skull ‘h’ Morphological. This superimposition is an example of a non-match for stage 2 of the study.

**Figure 4.7.** Photograph of case 6264, matched to skull ‘g’. This superimposition is an example of a positive match. The photograph and skull with their landmarks are all visible in this image- the blue landmarks are from the skull and the white landmarks are from the photograph.

**Figure 4.8.** Dot match of case 6264 and skull g. This figure shows the superimposition with the skull and photograph removed so that an assessment of the landmarks or ‘dots’ could be made. This image is an example of matching landmarks.

**Figure 4.9.** Photograph of case 6264, matched to skull ‘a’. This superimposition is an example of a non-match for stage 3 of the study. The photograph (white dots) and skull (blue dots) with their landmarks are all visible in this image.

**Figure 4.10.** Dot match of case 6264 and skull ‘a’. This figure shows the superimposition with the skull and photograph removed so that an assessment of the landmarks or ‘dots’ could be made by the investigator. This image is an example of a non-match between the landmarks of the skull and photograph as many of the landmarks do not fit the criteria for matching each other- they are too far apart.

**Figure 5.1.** 3-dimensional image of a CT scanned skull which has been rendered a 3-dimensional image in 3D Doctor.

**Figure 5.2.** 3-dimensional image rendered from a 3D scan at Ergotech viewed in 3D Studio Max.
List of Tables

Table 2.1. Table of requirements of a lateral consistent fit between skull and face (taken from Austin-Smith and Maples)  
Table 2.2. Table of requirements of a frontal consistent fit between skull and face (taken from Austin-Smith and Maples)  
Table 3.1. Landmark abbreviation and landmark complete name which provide explanations to Figure 3.5.  
Table 3.2. Landmark abbreviation and landmark complete name which provide explanations to Figure 3.6.  
Table 3.3. Orientation landmarks. The description of the landmark on the skull (bony landmark) and the corresponding soft tissue landmark is given. The bony tissue landmarks are adapted from Martin and Saller and Knussman and translated in Moore-Jansen et al., and the soft tissue landmarks are adapted from Farkas.  
Table 3.4. Primary landmarks. The description of the landmark on the skull (bony landmark) and the corresponding soft tissue landmark is given. The bony tissue landmarks are adapted from Martin and Saller and Knussman and translated in Moore-Jansen et al., and the soft tissue landmarks are adapted from Farkas.  
Table 3.5. Secondary landmarks. The description of the landmark on the skull (bony landmark) and the corresponding soft tissue landmark is given. The bony tissue landmarks are adapted from Martin and Saller and Knussman and translated in Moore-Jansen et al., and the soft tissue landmarks are adapted from Farkas.  
Table 3.6. Criteria for matching of primary landmarks (anterior view).  
Table 3.7. Criteria for matching of secondary landmarks (anterior view).  
Table 4.1. Results of morphological assessment: positive matches. The cases where the correct skull was included in the list of possibilities are here highlighted in yellow.  
Table 4.2. Summary of results of morphological assessment. The cases where the correct photograph was not included in the list of possibilities are here highlighted in blue. The case highlighted in purple is the only case where only the correct skull was matched to its photograph.  
Table 4.3. Results of landmark-based assessment: positive matches. The cases where
the correct skull was included in the list of possibilities are here highlighted in yellow.

**Table 4.4.** Summary of results of landmark-based assessment. The cases where the correct skull was not included in the list of possibilities are here highlighted in blue.

**Table 4.5.** Combined results of stage 2 and stage 3. The cases where the correct skull was included in the list of possibilities are here highlighted in yellow. The cases where the correct skull was not included in the list of possibilities are here highlighted in blue. The case highlighted in purple is the only case where only the correct skull was matched to its photograph and the case highlighted in red is the only case for both morphological and landmark based assessment where the correct skull was not matched to the photograph.

**Table 4.6.** Summary of overall results from the two different techniques used as well as the two techniques combined.
Abstract

One of the aims of forensic sciences is to determine the identities of victims of crime. In some cases the investigators may have ideas as to the identities of the victims and in these situations, ante mortem photographs of the victims could be used and identities established through skull-photo superimposition. The aim of this study was to evaluate the accuracy of a newly developed digital photographic superimposition technique on a South African sample of cadaver photographs and skulls, from the Pretoria Bone Collection.

Forty facial photographs were selected and for each photograph, 10 skulls (including the skull corresponding to the photograph) were used for superimposition. The investigator did not know which of the 10 skulls corresponded to the photograph in question. The skulls were scanned 3-dimensionally, using a Cyberware™ Model 3030 Colour-3D Scanhead scanner. Once scanned, the raw data for the skulls were ‘cleaned’ using Cysurf™ programme. The photographs were also scanned for superimposition in the 3D Studio Max programme. Superimposition in 3D Studio Max involves a morphological superimposition, whereby a skull is superimposed over the photograph and assessed for a morphological match. Superimposition using selected anatomical landmarks was also performed to assess the match.

A total of 400 skull-photo superimpositions were carried out using the morphological assessment and another 400 using the anatomical landmarks. In 85% of cases the correct skull was included in the possible matches for a particular photograph using morphological assessment. However, in all of these cases, between zero and three other skulls out of 10 possibilities could also match a specific photograph. In the landmark based assessment, the correct skull was included in 80% of cases. Once again, however, between one and seven other skulls out of 10 possibilities also matched the photograph. When using the morphological and landmark assessments combined, 97.5% of correct skulls were included in the list of possibilities, but between one and seven false positives per case were found.

This study indicates that skull-photo superimposition has limited use in the identification of human skeletal remains, but may be useful as an initial screening tool. Corroborative techniques should also be used in the identification process.
Abstrak

Een van die doelwitte van forensiese wetenskap is om die identiteit van slagoffers van misdaad te bepaal. In sommige gevalle het die speurders ‘n idee van die identiteit van die slagoffer en in sulke gevalle kan voordoodse fotos van die oorledene gebruik word om deur middel van skedel-foto-superimposisie die slagoffer te identifiseer. Die doelwit van hierdie studie was om die akkuraatheid van ‘n nuwe digitale foto-superimposisie tegniek op ‘n Suid-Afrikaanse groep van kadawer fotos en skedels uit die Pretoria Beneversameling te evalueer.

Veertig fotos van gesigte is gekies en vir elke foto is 10 skedels (insluitende die foto wat ooreenstem met die skedel) gebruik vir superimposisie. Die navorser het nie geweet watter van die 10 skedels ooreenstem met die betrokke foto nie. Die skedel is met ‘n Cyberware™ Model 3030 Colour-3D Scanhead in drie dimensies geskandeer. Na skandering is die rou data van die model met Cysurf™ sagteware skoongemaak. Die fotos is ook geskandeer vir superimposisie met die 3D Studio Max program. Superimposisie in 3D Studio Max behels ‘n morfologiese superimposisie, waar die skedel oor die fotos geplaas is en geëvalueer is vir morfologiese ooreenstemming. Superimposisie met die gebruik van geselekteerde anatomiese landmerke is ook gedoen om die ooreenstemming te evalueer.

‘n Totaal van 400 skedel-foto-superimposisies is gedoen met gebruik van morfologiese evaluasie en ‘n verdere 400 is gedoen met gebruik van anatomiese landmerke. In 85% van die gevalle was die korrekte skedel ingesluit in die moontlike ooreenstemmings met ‘n spesifieke foto, waar morfologiese evaluering gedoen is. Maar, in al hierdie gevalle kon tussen nul en drie ander skedels uit 10 moontlikhede ook met ‘n spesifieke foto ooreenstem. Met die gebruik van die landmerk assessering, was die korrekte skedel in 80% van die gevalle ingesluit. Maar weerens, het tussen een en sewe ander skedels uit 10 moontlikhede ook met ‘n spesifieke foto ooreengestem. Waar die morfologiese en landmerk evaluasie tegnieke gekombineerd gebruik was, was 97.5% van die korrekte skedels ingesluit in die lys van moontlikhede, maar daar was tussen een en sewe vals positiewe per geval gevind.

Hierdie studie dui daarop dat skedel-foto-superimposisie beperkte aanwending vir die identifikasie van menslike oorskot het, maar wel nuttig kan wees as ‘n aanvanklike siftingsmetode. Stawende tegnieke moet ook gebruik word in die identifikasie proses.
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