

Ethical Dilemmas of Research on Ancient Human Remains

Ancient human remains represent *both* individuals deserving of respectful treatment in death *and* a scientific resource for improving our understanding of past societies and its people. This duality is the source of a range of ethical dilemmas, particularly when the remains also represent marginalized or vulnerable ethnic, religious or minority groups. Researchers who wish to perform research on such remains must carefully consider the impact their research may have on extant groups.

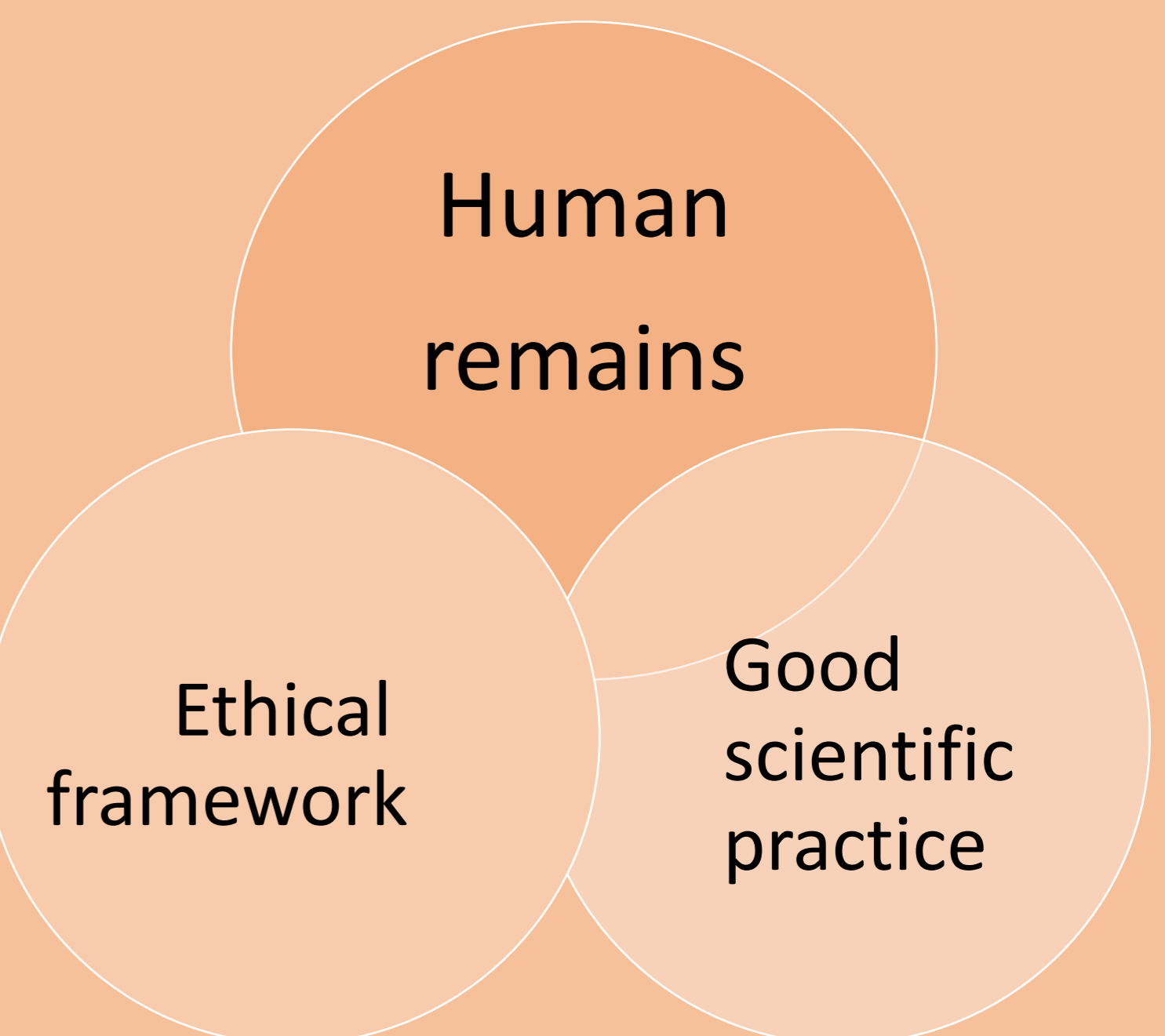
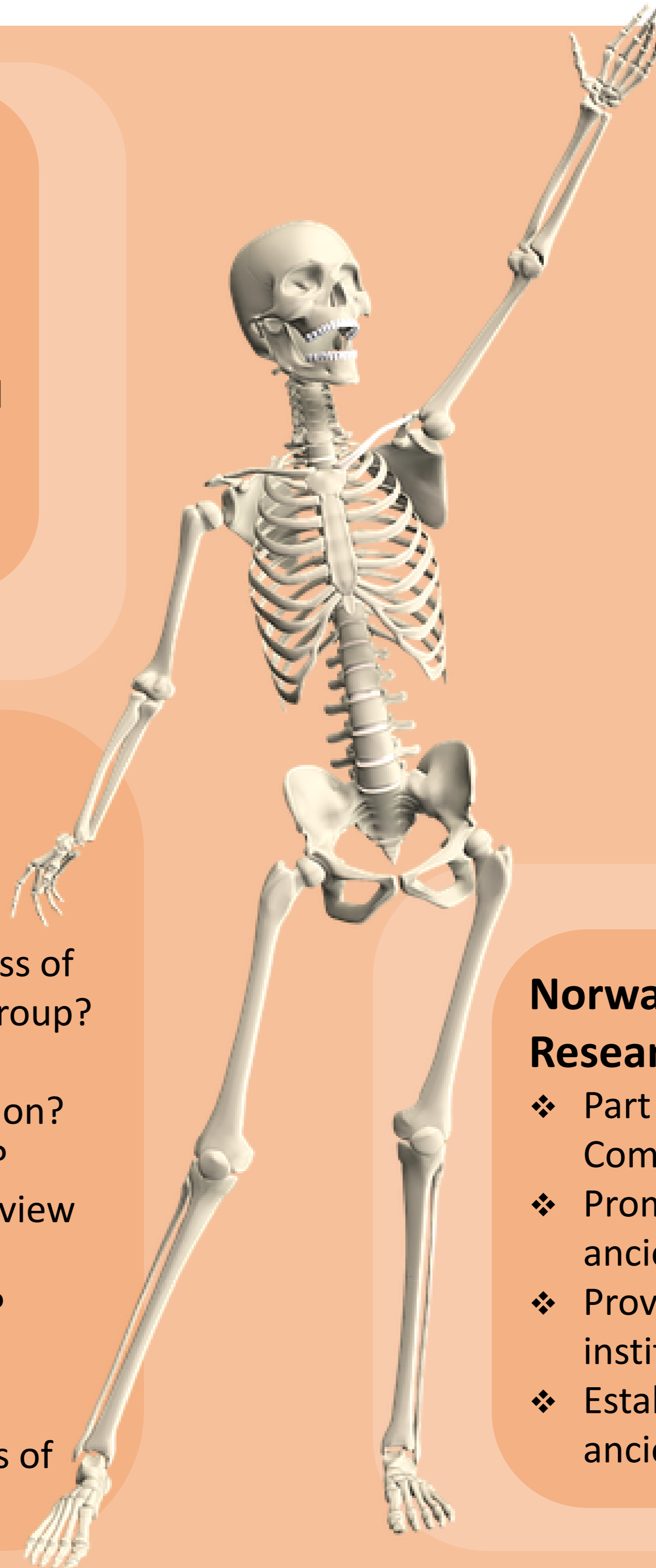
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Repatriation of human remains

Throughout history, museums and collectors worldwide have collected human remains. Some of the remains are of unknown provenance. Some are of individuals representing groups or communities that have experienced oppression, humiliation or other abusive treatment. Claims to have human remains repatriated (returned to its place of origin) have been put forward by different communities. In the last decade, an increasing number of museums have started repatriation processes.

Typical dilemmas

- ❖ Should research be conducted at all?
- ❖ Should the remains be repatriated?
- ❖ Who has the right/responsibility to decide?
- ❖ In cases of repatriation/reburial, should authorities consider the loss of future research potential, or merely the concerns of the affected group? Can a middle ground be found?
- ❖ In cases of research, is the research based on respect and recognition?
- ❖ What is the potential impact of the research on vulnerable groups?
- ❖ What to do if technology and science meet an incompatible world view or belief system?
- ❖ How to consider the different stakeholders and perspectives fairly?
- ❖ What is the responsibility of the researchers and the institution?
- ❖ Can ethical guidelines help address these issues, or are they just another western view imposed without consideration for the views of others?



Norway's National Committee for Research Ethics on Human Remains

- ❖ Part of The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees
- ❖ Promotes ethically responsible research on ancient human remains
- ❖ Provides ethical advice to researchers, research institutions and authorities
- ❖ Establishes guidelines for ethical research on ancient human remains

The Rapa Nui (Easter Island) case



In the 1950s, the Norwegian adventurer Thor Heyerdahl brought human remains (skulls) from Rapa Nui to Norway under questionable circumstances. These are held at the Kon-Tiki Museum and the University of Oslo.

In 2013, 2017 and 2018, a Norwegian research group sought to perform aDNA analyses, which involve the use of destructive methods, on these remains to investigate Heyerdahl's previously discredited theories regarding the peopling of Rapa Nui.

Norway's National Committee for Research Ethics on Human Remains advised against the sampling on the grounds of:

- ❖ Unclear ownership of the skulls
- ❖ The lack of consultation with/permission from the local population on the island

The committee advised the research project to *identify and consult relevant organizations and local communities before sampling*. This would be the local repatriation committee and the elders committee on the island, and not the Chilean authorities.



In 2019, the magazine *Research Ethics* (Forskningsetikk, 2019:3) wrote an article about the Rapa Nui case, revealing that the research group had sampled the skulls without regarding the committee's advice.

How to deal with researchers and/or institutions disregarding these types of ethical concerns?

