

Consensus

Michele Triplett – June 2025

Certain words become so trendy that they lose their meaning and intent. When words are carelessly thrown around, meanings get lost and no longer describe reality. The word narcissist is a good example. The word narcissist has been overused to the point that it's meaning has been reduced to describe anyone who is egotistical. In forensics, consensus has become one of those words.

The word consensus started out with a positive meaning signifying that concepts are thoroughly discussed, constantly questioned, and alternatives are considered. In the end, a stronger result is achieved which improves communal concepts and procedures. After all, science aims to validate procedures until they become commonplace or 'consensus of the community'. Concepts are put out for public comments to ensure the widest possible range of views. Consensus decisions give practitioners a sense of involvement, being part of something significant, which creates buy-in.

Although *consensus* sounds like a good thing, there is a concept known as *false consensus* recognized in 1977). *False consensus* is overestimating that the majority have the same belief (e.g., examiners can exclude on pattern type, we do it all the time). When consensus is achieved inappropriately, it has the strong possibility of leading to faulty outcomes. Inappropriate consensus usually happens because of premature decisions, insufficient testing, reliance on flawed studies, ignoring facts, discounting the input of others, or giving more weight to some considered to be authorities (e.g., they are subject matter experts). In the end, the word consensus has deteriorated to mean that a few more were in favor of an idea than others. Consensus could mean the community, but it could also be the views of only a few that have a louder voice.

Concepts that are not thoroughly debated will eventually be challenged and possibly rejected (e.g. 'fingerprints have been proven to be unique', 'conclusions are absolute and conclusive', 'zero error rate'). In 2025, some current concepts being considered include:

- Is a single discrepancy enough to exclude (as in the draft of ASB 016, terminology)?
- What information is *task relevant* for a comparison and conclusion?
- Is *source identification* clearer terminology than *identification*?
- Do conclusions derived from a database need a higher threshold?
- Are exclusions inferences or categorical conclusions?

Leaders have an ethical responsibility to think critically, rigorously scrutinize concepts, and make sure consensus recommendations are based on evidence, not feelings.

In order to fix a problem, we have to recognize a problem exists.