



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

### H42 Race — A New Synthesis for a New Century

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Before WW II race was a major subject of study in physical anthropology and some social sciences. Race was viewed as a logical extension of the Linnean binomial system, working from Family, Genus, and species to sub-species, or race. The horrible excesses of the National Socialist Party in racially "purifying" Germany in the 1930s and 1940s lead many anthropologists and others to decry the concept of race as dangerous and declare race to no longer exist in living humans. Other criticisms include the fact that anthropologists cannot agree upon the number of races that exist, the inability to precisely define the geographical extent of racial boundaries, and the lability of human variation chronologically. There can be no logical answer to the charge that if race exists it shouldn't because of the catastrophic mischief that some have wreaked in using the concept; that is an unfortunate fact of history which no person of good will wishes to see repeated. Answers or explanations can be provided for other criticisms. To the criticism that race does not exist because we cannot agree upon the number of races – there is also disagreement as to the number of sexes in humans; is it two or three or six or thirty-two? If race does not exist because of disagreement as to number, neither can sex exist and we are a unisex species. As to the criticism that we cannot draw clear geographical boundaries between races, the author submits that discrete boundaries are a better definition of incipient species or genera than subspecies. We will always expect contiguously distributed subspecies to interbreed and create fuzzy boundaries that may change through time, even short periods of time. Another criticism, that race cannot be ascribed to an individual, the author submits that forensic anthropologists can and ought to attempt to do this in every case submitted to them. Papers to be presented later in this symposium will present means of identifying individuals of different racial groups and even racial mixes, and sometimes the statistical probability of a correct ethnic or racial identification. We regularly do this with anthroposcopic skeletal traits and can now do so with an adequate DNA sample. A last criticism of the racial concept is that individuals in the same nuclear family may belong to separately defined sub-sub races or sub-sub-sub races. Rather than dealing with "race," perhaps we are dealing with major gene complexes which merit further genetic rather than taxonomic study. In the past 60 years anthropology matured in methods of studying human variation, human genetics and increased types of variation have been discovered and described. We have also become more sophisticated in theoretical and philosophical issues. Following a Wittgensteinian suggestion, a new approach is suggested in viewing race as a legitimate taxonomic level by referring to race not as a firm, fixed racial "type," but rather as a floating concept, emphasizing trait associations much like the definitions of culture areas in cultural anthropology and languages in linguistics. In each, we can define a culture area or language, but the exact borders may not be precisely definable, and we expect considerable cultural or linguistic (or genetic) variation within each. That does not vitiate the validity of the culture area concept or the idea of a language – each obviously exists – any more than fuzzy and labile borders of genetic groups vitiates the concept of race; whatever groupings may arise should be determined empirically, not denied emotionally. While still not in favor, the recent interest in sexual selection ought to refocus our interest on superficial anthroposcopic traits as suggested by Darwin in 1871. Despite the social and biological differences which exist today, we must remember that we are all united as a single species with a shared history and a shared future.

**Taxonomy, Race Classification, Evolutionary Theory**