



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H46 Race as a Viable Concept

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This presentation presents an argument for retaining racial categorizations in physical anthropology within appropriate contexts.

This presentation aims to add to the discussion of the contentious issues of the use of the race concept and race terminology in physical and forensic anthropology.

The concept of race is discussed in reference to the American Association of Physical Anthropologists' 1996 "AAPA Statement on Biological Aspects of Race," the intent of which was to formalize the Association's position on this contentious issue. The position of the AAPA via the "statement" is that racial divisions are perpetuated by the social convention of race, that the concept of race itself is not biologically and scientifically sound, and that the discipline of physical anthropology is obligated to move away from the race concept. This is to prevent the perpetuation or perceived legitimization of racial discrimination based on research within physical anthropology. The issues of social race versus biological race and historical and contemporary conceptions of the term *race* are considered in order to explore the race concept. It is argued here that race, as currently used in physical anthropology, is closely aligned with its social component, is neither bound by past misuses nor an idea of rigid and discrete biological boundaries, and remains a viable concept.

Categorization, clinalism, and their relationship with the concept of biological race are discussed in the first section. The tendency of humans to categorize is considered in terms of historically hierarchical racial divisions and other human categorizations in order to illustrate the cogency or lack of cogency of such categorizations, and to show that discrete and pure examples—the absence of which opponents of the race concept cite as reason to do away with it—are not a necessary condition for a categorization to be valid and useful. The concept of clinalism and the critique of race based on historical racial ideas speak against the continued use of the race concept. This would be reasonable if race as currently conceived and employed in physical anthropology retained its historical typological character. This issue is examined through a comparison of clinal concepts and historical racial notions with the usage of racial terminology and the meaning of race in contemporary physical anthropology.

The second section discusses the relationship between social race, racism, and the concept of biological race. With social race a reality, what is its relationship to concepts of biological race? The problem of racism is discussed in reference to this question, and it is argued that racism, while based on differences of many kinds, is a phenomenon neither grounded in nor activated by scientific realities. Racism is therefore not susceptible to contrary scientific proof or argument, and the effectiveness of moving away from the biological race concept is questionable in terms of its ability to alleviate the problem. This situation is complicated by the undisputed existence of social race. It is suggested that a more effective strategy for combating racism than race denial is acknowledgment of and dialog about differences, whether social or physical, such that these differences can be placed within their proper contexts and parameters. The acknowledgement of human biological variation is not fated to be bound to hierarchical schema, but is and can be presented as a unifying and positive component of the human condition.

The practicality of the race concept is discussed in the final section. Forensic anthropology makes use of racial categories and has highly accurate methods for assessing ancestry, one of several critical determinations in the important business of identifying unknown dead, whether victims of crime, disaster, war or other circumstances. Critiques of forensic anthropological methodology are considered, as are alternatives to the use of racial terminology and the race concept within the subdiscipline. The use of the race concept in forensic anthropology illustrates the reorientation of the biological concept of race from the historical, determinist model to its current, more limited and accurate model of expressing human adaptive variation.

Race, Ancestry, Racism