



Correspondence

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Potential for Mischief

Considering that terms have been misused by politicians to arouse racial prejudice—as “pure Aryan” was by Nazi propagandists—anthropologists should learn not to attach the work “pure” to racial designations, even when they mean to refer to a very minor situation that relates neither to individuals nor groups.

The terms “pure Caucasian” and “pure Amerindian” have begun to appear even in leading journals of physical anthropology. The reference is to MtDNA haplotypes. A haplotype is the pattern on a segment of DNA, and MtDNA is a tiny fraction of a person’s DNA (one or two one-hundredths of 1%). It lies outside the cell nucleus, and thus ordinarily is passed from mother to child unchanged. There is another very small fraction of a person’s DNA that does not recombine each generation, a non-recombining part of one of the smallest chromosomes, the Y chromosome that determines male sex.

I know of no haplotype, even of these small bits of DNA, that approaches universality in some group of humans while being lacking in all other human groups

and would thus earn such a title as “pure Caucasian.” Indeed there is no general agreement about who is a Caucasian. The term does not refer to the Caucasus Mountain folk as such, but is variously applied to most Europeans, Western Asians, some South Asians and North Africans and numerous people in the Americas, Australia and elsewhere. “Amerindian” also encompasses a varied group of peoples of the New World who have a number of different MtDNA haplotypes some of which are shared with some people elsewhere.

All living human beings belong to a single species. The nature of a species is that all members share common ancestors and have the potential to have grandchildren and other descendants in common. Isolation, hence biological “purity” of descent lines, is impossible for long in a species that travels as easily as ours. For thousands of years humans have had the ability to carry fresh water and hence cross open salt water and the ability to plan treks. Travel and consequent intermingling has increased over the millennia and firmly binds the species together.

Ivory soap used to be advertised as 99 and 44 one hundredths per cent pure. The nonrecombinant fraction of DNA is far less than the 56 one hundredths of one percent of impurities in that soap. How much soap do you think they could have sold by advertising the 56/100 of one per cent purity?

Of course the authors of the technical works and editors who let the language pass unchallenged do not mean to ascribe the purity to individuals or populations. The problem is the potential for mischief. Innocent and not so innocent misunderstandings have distorted the misuse of ordinary words by scientists in the past. Editors and those who review manuscripts should prevent the publication in profes-

sional journals of language that so easily could lead to such misinterpretation.

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Mis-statements on Race

The proposed AAA statement on “race” (April 1997 AN, p 1), however we define it, deserves rethinking and rewriting, and so do some of the gratuitous comments contained in the article.

The argument concerning the relative magnitudes of intergroup and intragroup differences is specious as written, for it confuses mean differences between populations and ranges or extremes within populations. Of course hypopituitary dwarfs and hyperpituitary giants differ more (in size) than Nilotics or Ituri Forest pygmies (as a group), but so what? On the question of “boundaries,” some breeding populations remain reproductively isolated by major oceans or vast distances, which is how they have come to differ in the first place. Even today the people of Oraibi are reproductively isolated from the Navajo who now surround them, and they in turn from the millions of “Anglos” of recent advent. So there are boundaries, despite what the proposed statement asserts. As to racial purity [*sic*], the draft proposers undoubtedly realize that nothing is absolutely pure, not even Ivory soap. To be meaningful the proposers might prefer to provide target estimates of gene flow, per generation or per millennium, or admixture estimates (M) for selected living populations.

When the article goes on to human identification (so-called “forensics”) in para-

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