

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

The first article in Volume 9, Number 4 of the *American Journal of Human Biology* is titled "Race difference in reproducibilities: The HERITAGE family study." I am puzzled and dismayed by the use of the word "race" in the title and in the text of this article. The authors provide an extremely vague notion of what they mean by "race." On page 416 they describe the "races" in the study as 90 families, "... of Caucasian descent (white) and 40 families of African-American ancestry (black)." Thus the "race" of subjects is defined by the term J.F. Blumenbach used in the mid-nineteenth century to describe his "most perfect" European skull—the Caucasian type; by a bipolar typology of skin color—white or black; and by both probable geographic origin of ancestry and citizenship—African-American.

I am puzzled by the authors' use of this intricate racial typology because they never explain how that typology relates to the scientific goals of their research. They say, again on page 416 that, "... the poolability of data across races is important to achieve the power to be able to detect fairly small changes in response to exercise training." The authors continue this concern by stating that, "... it is of interest to insure comparability of data quality and precision of measurements by checking to see if measurements in blacks are as reproducible as those in whites."

Why do the authors suspect that "blacks" do not measure as accurately as "whites?" The authors provide no evidence or literature citations to support that notion. Perhaps the sentence would read better if the order of skin color groups were reversed, that is, "... checking to see if the measurements in whites are as reproducible as those in blacks." No, that does not seem to make any sense either.

The American Association of Physical Anthropologists, the American Anthropological Association, UNESCO, and many other scientific, social, and political organizations have proposed and/or adopted guidelines for the use of the word "race" and the use of the jargon of racial typology. The use of "race" and racial categories in the article in ques-

tion violates these guidelines. One example, from the UNESCO statement on race, is that typological "... classifications are limited and not in keeping with the newer knowledge and concepts of human variability. These classifications also carry the risk of inviting abusive and offensive generalizations."

Imagine the case of a student reading the article who takes away the message that it is easier to reproduce the measurements of "whites" and, therefore, they make better research subjects than "blacks." Now, the authors conclude that there are no differences in reproducibility between the "races," so one could argue that the true message of the paper is one of "racial" equality in terms of data quality. But, this is only one study and it may be just the author's good fortune that "race" differences were not found. Furthermore, many students, and their teachers, will still wonder why the "racial" difference was expected in the first place.

I wonder about that as well. My take-home message from this paper is that the authors must have some secret evidence that their hazily defined "races" are likely to be different in terms of the accuracy or reliability of some of the variables measured in the study. As proclaimed in the title, "Race differences..." is the purpose for publishing this paper.

"Race" and racial typology may have some usefulness in social and political affairs. It has no usefulness in human biology, for there are no sub-species of *Homo sapiens*. If the term "race" is used in scientific journals, such as the AJHB, then its use must be very clearly justified on the basis of human social or political affairs. I urge you as the Editor-in-Chief of the AJHB to treat this issue with the same care as you would issues of fraud or plagiarism. There is too much at stake regarding the reputation of the journal and the Human Biology Association.

Sincerely,  
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