Problems with using racial classification to understand modern human variation

Problem One: Categories do not reflect some natural divisions, but are constructed by humans

- Continuously distributed polygenic traits do not break into discrete categories
- Humans decide where to break between continuously distributed variation, and which variation to include in which category (where to draw line between one race and the other)
- Since the categories are not a reflection of reality but are human constructs, they are open to bias

Problem Two: There is loss of understanding of the variation present in human populations

- Once it is decided where to break between continuously distributed variation, and everyone is pushed into one category or another, they are classified and identified as being "like" that category... They are identified with that "type" although they may not be like that type (see problem 1, above)
- Reduces understanding of the variation present within the species, which is the very thing we are trying to understand through the classification system.

Problem Three: Traits do not co-vary

- Skin, hair, and eye color, eye shape and facial features, body shape, etc. are not genetically linked to each other and can vary independently of each other and of other traits.

Problem Four: Confusion of obvious with significant

- Races are classified according to a set of traits that are externally obvious: skin, eye, hair color, etc.
- These traits are neither more nor less significant than any number of other less obvious traits.
- There is confusion between obvious traits versus significant traits. How do we decide which traits to base the categories on? Why not categories based on toe length, earlobe shape, blood type? They may be less obvious, but are they less significant than any other characteristics?

Problem Five: There is more variation within human "races" than there is between them

- Study by Richard Lewontin (Harvard population geneticist)
  - Examined sample from 7 geographical areas with several equally weighted populations within each area
  - Calculated population differences in allele frequencies for 17 polymorphic traits
  - Results: 6.3% of total genetic variability is between major populations; 93.7% of total genetic variability is found within major populations. 15% of all human genetic variation is found between geographical and local "races" and 85% is within them.

- Another large-scale study (DNA markers among 59 different groups, 12,000 individuals) found the vast majority of variation (up to 98.5%) within groups not between them.

Problem Six: Races can NOT be ranked relative to each other according to certain “racial” traits

- There is an INCORRECT assumption that racial groups can be arranged in a hierarchy, with some groups innately (biologically) superior to others. That ranking is used to give or deny members of "races" access to power, prestige and wealth.

- There is no biological evidence that intelligence, ethics, morals, etc. are somehow linked to “race,” and therefore, no means by which you can rank “races” in a hierarchy.

- SEE BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM and EUGENICS

Problem Seven: Race is a cultural, not a biological construct.

- The concept of race as a biological construct is based on false assumptions. It reduces appreciation and understanding of variation, it is subject to human biases, and distracts attention from more pertinent questions about human variation.

- The concept of race is of limited usefulness for understanding human variation.