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RACE AND BIOLOGY: CHANGING CURRENTS IN MUDDY WATERS

ABSTRACT

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Attempts to deal with the range and distribution of human biological variation have confounded natural scientists since the voyages of discovery. That there is an inherited, biological basis to the patterns that have been observed is indisputable. That this basis is useful as an organizing concept in today's world is not, on the grounds of biology as well as other fields of scholarship. The problem is rooted in the development of the natural sciences over the past several hundred years and its impact on our understanding of variation and pattern in human biology. Three major interpretations of race have appeared over this time: 1), trait-based; 2), place-based; and 3), population-based. Each of these grew out of an emerging theoretical current that reflected scientific thought of that period, and all are still found in today's ideas about and use of the race concept in research and scholarship. But none has advanced the validity of race as a useful category for organizing biology-based investigation. Our challenge is not to develop yet another way of compressing human variability into nominal categories, but to work to reduce the disparities that result from the values attached to race and to continue to demonstrate the complex interactions of biology, environment, and behavior.