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A conversation about biological complexity and evolution, and the societal aspects of science.

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Monday, January 27, 2014

The Mismeasure of Dog

By [Holly Dunsworth](#)

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When you see a study that claims to predict behavior variation with cranial variation your anthropology radar might start pinging. If your anthropology radar is especially sensitive, it will ping regardless of the organism. And when that organism is the domestic dog, you might be tempted to ready the torpedoes before you've even read the abstract.

The Mismeasure of Dog

That's because, for one, people often like conversations rooted in eugenics or racism often involve judgments of blood purity, much as American Kennel Club members and Westminster Dog Show contestants owe their worthiness to their pure bred ancestors. *This isn't a perspective that many anthropologists abide.*

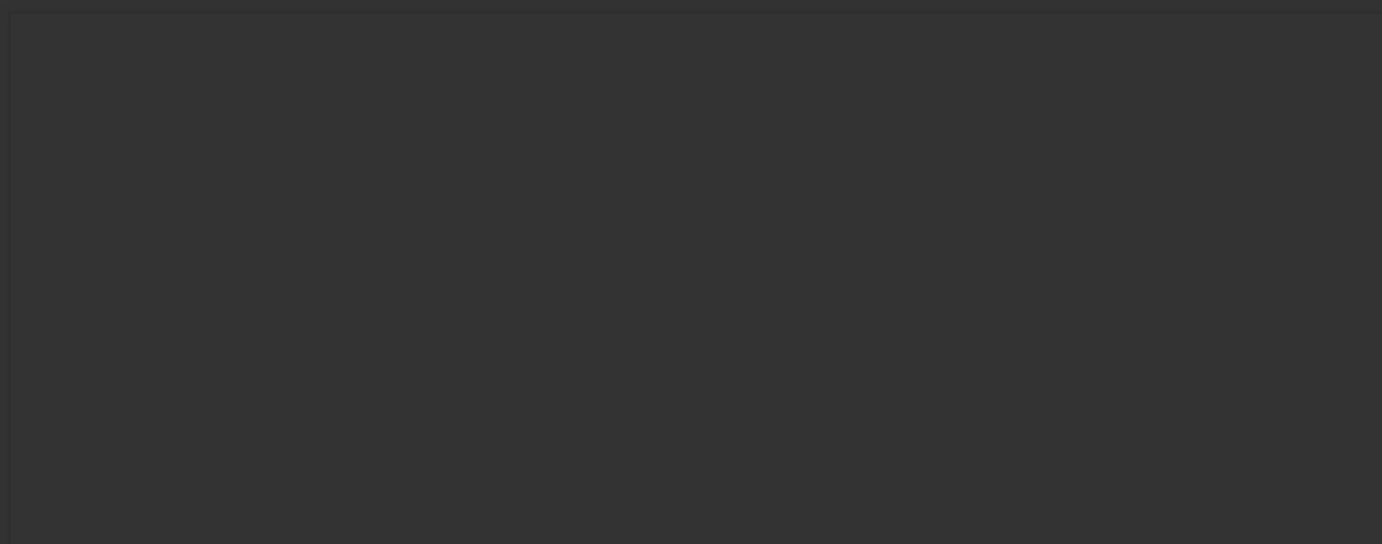
And, secondly, there's a long history of measuring human heads, divvying them up by race, showing that they're distinct by race, and then explaining differences in behavior at the race-level in the general or specific context of those race-level differences in the head. *Another practice that few anthropologists abide.*

We're going to cover some ground on human heads before getting to the dogs'. So please... Sit... Stay... And if you do, we'll get to the dogs in just a second.

Brain size, or cranial capacity, has long been a favorite measure by folks interested in human variation. The cephalic index (CI) has too. These have been used in the name of science by racists, racialists, and folks who are neither. CI might be a favorite because not only does it appear to separate race categories and even populations within them, but it's easily, cheaply, and noninvasively obtained from live humans, while it also avoids phrenological subjectivity.

How phrenology-free is CI? It's not completely clear because, to my knowledge, no one has linked CI to behavior any better than they can with a lumpy left parietal. Remember, however, that many CI uses have not, and are not, for explaining behavior. CI's often measured to study human variation between or within populations, and maybe relatedness, and maybe change over time (evolution).

In anthropology, CI involves the ratio of the breadth to the length of the cranium.



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