

Researchers refute widespread racist analogy comparing human races to dog breeds

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Holly Dunsworth. Credit: Michael Salerno

As a researcher and teacher, Holly Dunsworth enjoys poking holes in

misconceptions about human evolution her students bring into the classroom.

This time, Dunsworth is targeting a recurring popular evolutionary [analogy](#) that compares human races with [dog breeds](#), one that may sound innocent and scientific on the surface but carries deep racist undertones.

Dunsworth, a University of Rhode Island professor of anthropology, has seen the dog-breed analogy crop up repeatedly on [social media](#) and even heard it during discussions on biological variation of humans in her [human evolution](#) class. She felt it needed to be refuted—and not just with a tweet or a blog post.

Dunsworth has responded with a 10,000-word, interdisciplinary study that shows "how the assumption that human races are the same as dog breeds is a racist strategy for justifying social, political, and economic inequality." The paper, "Human races are not like dog breeds: Refuting a Racist Analogy," was published last week by the online journal *Evolution: Education and Outreach*.

It was co-written with geneticists Heather L. Norton, associate professor of molecular anthropology at the University of Cincinnati; Ellen E. Quillen, assistant professor of molecular medicine at the Wake Forest School of Medicine; Abigail W. Bigham, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan; and Laurel N. Pearson, assistant professor of anthropology at Pennsylvania State University.

"I approached them and said, 'Have you heard this analogy before?'" said Dunsworth. "I said, 'Let's take it down.' They said, 'Absolutely.'"

The five, all of whom attended graduate school together at Penn State, decided the best way to refute it was with a peer-reviewed, [scholarly work](#) that rebuked "the illegitimate appeal to science and the erroneous

'logic' of the widespread analogy." The analogy uses the perceived variation in dog breeds to support the superiority of one human [race](#) over another.

"In the U.S., and likely beyond, the human race-dog breed analogy is not merely an academic question about patterns of variation; today it factors substantially into the popular debate about whether race is fundamentally biological as opposed to a social construct, and it carries forward an ugly American tradition," the papers says. "Inherent to the analogy is the transference of beliefs about pure-bred [dogs](#) onto notions of human racial 'purity,' which helped U.S. legislators pass anti-miscegenation laws in the early 20th century."

The analogy, Dunsworth said, "leads people to doubt the consensus among scientists and academics on the sociocultural significance of race, where the construction of race is emphasized over patterns of biological variation (which are not synonymous with race). This is a tough discussion for newcomers to enter, given that there is perceptible variation in human traits around the world that can be used to guess the geographic locale of some portion of someone's recent ancestors, and given that ancestry is a factor in the sociocultural construction of race. The bad analogy takes advantage of the confusion or frustration that results from this disconnect between what people see versus what they hear about race not being a biological concept.

"This dog-breed comparison does not hold up to science and to everything we know about what 'race' is and is not. What's worse, the people who are trotting out this bad analogy do not have innocent intentions. They are not objectively curious about the wonders of biology, they are not confused about the sociocultural construction of race, they are interested in justifying racism and convincing others to do the same."

The paper attacks the analogy by demonstrating the differences in patterns of genetic and biological variation between humans and dogs, contrasting them and explaining how differences between the two are unsurprising given the two species evolved very differently. Dogs are domesticated and different breeds have evolved through highly controlled breeding that has drastically reduced the variation within breeds. The paper goes on to lay out decades of interdisciplinary work beyond genetics and biology that has documented how the phenomenon of "race" in humans is vastly different from any groupings we impose on other animals.

"History tells us how people who use the dog-[breed](#) analogy for race are perpetuating racism," said Dunsworth. "It's bad science, bad everything. 'Race' as we know it in our daily lives—and as we have known it throughout history—goes well beyond science. Race is socioculturally, politically and historically constructed, but dog breeds are ... dogs."

Dunsworth and her colleagues ensured the paper would be easily accessible, making it freely readable online without subscription. For the lay reader, there is a glossary of terms to make the scientific argument easier to understand.

"We wanted it to be open access so that when you Google this, you can read a peer-reviewed, scholarly article that explains it," said Dunsworth, a widely published researcher whose interests include the evolution of humans and other primates. "There's so much in this paper. When I share it on Twitter, I'm just going to say you have to read the whole thing. That's why this exists."

More information: Heather L. Norton et al. Human races are not like dog breeds: refuting a racist analogy, *Evolution: Education and Outreach* (2019). [DOI: 10.1186/s12052-019-0109-y](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12052-019-0109-y)

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