THE MEANING AND CONSEQUENCES OF MORPHOLOGICAL VARIATION

ABSTRACT

Richard L. Jantz
Professor of Anthropology
Department of Anthropology
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN 37996

Variation in cranial morphology has been controversial for a century or
more, because of its historical connection to race. Boas’s classic immigrant study
conducted for the U.S. Immigration Commission in 1910 brought about the
realization that cranial morphology is not stable and forced anthropologists to
accept phenotypic plasticity as a component of human morphological variation.
Many recent scholars, and Boas himself, have exaggerated the differences
between immigrants and their American born children. The differences, although
statistically significant, are small in relation to ethnic variation and do not obscure
it. Moreover, the causes are more complex than simple exposure to an American
environment, possibly including nutrition, break down of breeding isolation, and
cultural factors such as treatment of infants.

Dramatic changes in the American environment since Boas’s study provide
anew the opportunity examine environmental influences on morphology.
Environmental changes include increase in nutritional quantity, reduced infant
mortality and childhood disease, breakdown of breeding isolation, and reduced
activity levels. Secular changes in cranial morphology were examined using over
1000 crania from individuals of know birth years, ranging from 1850 to 1975.
Changes in cranial morphology in both American Whites and Blacks are profound,
the cranium becoming higher and narrower. These changes are likely attributable
to changes in growth of the cranial base, perhaps acting through timing of
maturation. However, the changes do not erase or substantially alter Black-White
differences, indicating that genetic variation is maintained. We cannot at present
apportion causes between plasticity and genetic causes, but it is likely that both
are involved.