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Letter to the Editors of Biometrics

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#### REFERENCES

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## CORRESPONDENCE

### Letter to the Editors of *Biometrics*

From: David J. Finney  
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To the Editor of *Biometrics*:

Stephen Stigler (2000) has given us a fascinating and valuable review. I intend no criticism of content when I express regret at his use of one word.

In his title, and just once in his text, Professor Stigler uses the word "biometrics." In the early years of our journal, I attempted to persuade Gertrude Cox, then the editor, that we should rename it either *Journal of Biometry* or simply *Biometry*. I had no success. I could never see good reason for adopting as the name of our discipline a well-formed adjective pluralized into the appearance of an ugly noun. That econometricians have done the same is poor excuse. Did Euclid ever see need to study "geometrics"? I think we never read of "calorimetrics," "colorometrics," or "optometrics."

Many universities and institutes have created departments of biometrics. Too often, alas, these have later been absorbed into departments of mathematics. Our work for improving logic and inference in quantitative biology is often impeded by ambiguities of terminology, as with the common confusions among chance, likelihood, odds, probability, and even risk or between important, real, and significant. By comparison, "biometrics" versus "biometry" is a minor issue, but all who practice statistical science need to strive for establishment and consistent use of good acceptable terminology. Without the standard symbolism and terminology that developed from the work of Lavoisier 200 years ago, where would chemistry be today?

I have heard it suggested that our Society's avoidance of the simple word "biometry" may have arisen from R. A. Fisher's disputes with Karl Pearson and his *BIOMETRIKA*, disputes that were soundly based but that continued too long. Dagnelie (1988) explored, in a scholarly manner, the 19th century uses of the word "biometry."

#### REFERENCES

Dagnelie, P. (1988). Les mots "biomètre," "biométrie" et "biométrie" au dix-neuvième siècle. *Biometric Bulletin* 5, 3-4.

Stigler, S. M. (2000). The problematic unity of biometrics. *Biometrics* 56, 653-658.

The author replied as follows:

I agree with David Finney that names are important, although I am more forgiving of linguistic inventions than he. The historical question of why Gertrude Cox resisted his advice is an interesting one. The noun "biometrics" was widely used in the early years of the 20th century, including by Karl Pearson himself as early as 1906 (Pearson, 1906, p. 45). The journal *Biometrics* grew out of the American Statistical Association's (ASA) Committee on Biometrics, first appointed in 1935. That committee subsequently proposed the creation of the Biometric Section of ASA, a proposal adopted in 1938. Why did they choose "biometric" rather than "biometry"? At the December 1936 ASA meeting on the establishment of the section, the question of the name did come up, when George Snedecor urged that it be called the "bio-statistics" section. But according to the report (*JASA*, 1938, p. 121), "this suggestion was not favorably received." "Biometry" was not even reported as a possible name. Why? One possible explanation is that, in the 1930s in the United States, the word "biometry" was particularly associated with the work of Raymond Pearl, who was not associated with the ASA Committee and who by then had fallen out to various degrees with R. A. Fisher, Karl Pearson, and E. B. Wilson, among others. The committee may have wished to avoid too close an association with Pearl. Or they may simply have been moving in the spirit of the time, seeking to be seen as a science on a level with economics. Some 20 years later, R. A. Fisher himself suggested the name for the then-new journal *Technometrics* (Box, 2000, p. xviii), and in more recent times, no one seems to have seriously entertained *Environmetry* as a name for the decade-old journal of *Environmetrics*. The historical die seems to have been cast, for better or worse.

#### REFERENCES

Box, G. E. P. (2000). *Box on Quality and Discovery*. New York: John Wiley.

Pearson, K. (1906). Walter Frank Raphael Weldon, 1860-1906, a memoir. *Biometrika* 5, 1-52.

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