

# Review of “Comment on the Proposal to Rename the R.A. Fisher Lecture” by Harry Crane, Joseph Guinness, and Ryan Martin

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## Summary of the Review

I have read the comment by Crane et al. on the proposal to rename the R.A. Fisher Lecture [<https://www.researchers.one/article/2020-06-11>], several discussions surrounding this comment as well as the original proposal, and some related material concerning both Fisher’s scientific career as well as his role in the eugenics movement. Based on this reading, I am dividing my review into three separate components. The gist of my review is that this comment by Crane et al. needs substantial revision, as argued in the following.

## Part I: Does the lecture celebrate all or “some” scientific contributions of Fisher?

The COPSS description for the R.A. Fisher Lecture clearly states that the lecture honors “the contributions of Sir Ronald Aylmer Fisher ... for ... advancement of statistical theory and applications.” Based on this, the authors seem to be of the opinion that it should be possible for everyone to look at this named lecture and focus only on Fisher’s contributions to modern statistical theory and application, while ignoring his additional role in the eugenics movement. However, since eugenics was put forth as “science” and Fisher engaged in the eugenics movement as a scientific endeavor (more on this in Part II below), this reviewer contends that there are many individuals who are likely to view this named lecture as an implicit celebration of both the “good” and the “ugly” scientific contributions of Fisher.

Based on some recent discussions on the social media, it is plausible that the authors might not agree with this viewpoint. However, it is worth remembering that the eugenics movement did not affect all subgroups equally. As such, this reviewer feels that, when thinking of the named lecture, it is unfair for someone to project his/her own ability to separate the “founder of modern statistical science” Fisher from the “eugenicist” Fisher onto other subgroups of people, especially those who suffered because of the ideas spread by eugenicists.

[Suggested Reading: The Forgotten Lessons of the American Eugenics Movement, New Yorker Magazine, April 27, 2016; <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-forgotten-lessons-of-the-american-eugenics-movement> (and the references within).]

## Part II: Were Fisher’s views on eugenics personal and were they compatible with “those” times?

At a few places within the comment, it is implicitly implied that Fisher, the scientist, should not be judged too harshly because (1) his views on eugenics were “personal” or “political” and (2) these views were compatible with moral values of those times. The passages in the comment that seem to imply this include:

“... Fisher’s personal views on eugenics have been criticized as incompatible with contemporary values ...”

“... eugenics is associated with beliefs that are so opposed to present-day ideals ...”

“... recognition is not granted or revoked on the pretense of ... political positioning ...”

“... disagreeing wholeheartedly with the personal beliefs of the scientists responsible for them ...”

“... retaining the name of the Fisher Lecture, in spite of Fisher’s personal views ...”

“... importance of Fisher’s scholarly contributions while also confronting his personal views on eugenics ...”

“... Apart from his scientific achievements, Fisher supported eugenics ...”

“... associated with beliefs and practices that are now considered dehumanizing ...”

I highly encourage the authors to revise this text in light of the following feedback:

- (1) Fisher undertook eugenics as a scientific endeavor, which was indeed initially established as a scientific discipline. It is well documented that eugenics was part-and-parcel of Fisher “the scientist.” He wrote scientific pieces that focused on eugenics; he served on eugenics-focused scientific organizations; and he influenced the public policy because of his scientific writings on eugenics. As such, this reviewer finds it difficult to accept that Fisher’s views on eugenics were simply of personal or political nature or were “apart from his scientific achievements”; rather, his views were very much of scientific nature and hence the feedback in Part I above. [Also, see Maryclare Griffin (Griffin, June 13 2020; <https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1271940745193275393.html>) for a similar argument.]
- (2) Both public and scientific views, especially after the Nazis co-opted the eugenics movement, shifted on eugenics *during* the lifetime of Fisher. This reviewer, however, could not find any evidence that Fisher revisited his morally reprehensible scientific ideas on eugenics even when the society had begun to acknowledge that these ideas are without any scientific merits. We see a glimpse of this in 1952 when Fisher, the scientist, was one of a handful of dissenters on the UNESCO statement on the nature of race and racial differences [see The Race Concept: Results of an Inquiry, UNESCO Document code: SS.53/II.9/A, 1952; <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000073351>]. This reviewer, in particular, is of the opinion that Fisher’s scientific views on eugenics were “considered dehumanizing” even during his times; this, coupled with the scientific nature of his eugenics views, take us back to Part I.

### Part III: What’s the way forward?

The original proposal called for dropping the name of Fisher from the lecture. The authors of the comment, on the other hand, have suggested a way forward where the lecture retains its name, but additional text gets added to the description of the lecture. This reviewer wonders if both are imperfect solutions, as noted below:

- (1) If the name were dropped completely, there is a fear (perhaps unfounded on this reviewer’s part) that the next generation of statisticians will only learn about Fisher “the genius” and not Fisher “the eugenicist”. Fisher will still be there in Fisher information and Fisher discriminant analysis and so forth, but the debate that ensues every year during the time of the Fisher lecture and that teaches dozens of newly minted researchers the ugly history of eugenics in statistics as part of that debate is likely to disappear.
- (2) If the name remains unchanged and the only change occurs in the description of the lecture, as the authors of this comment suggest, then this reviewer feels that the “acknowledgement” is in danger of becoming inconsequential since there are not too many people who read the official description of an award. As such, this reviewer is of the opinion that this change in description might only be a small shift away from the status quo, which fails to acknowledge the troubling aspects of Fisher the scientist.

So what’s the way forward? I have thought hard about it and, if the goal is not to let the lessons of the eugenics history of statistics go to waste then I wonder if a hyphenated lecture name along the lines of “[XYZ]–Fisher Lecture” is a better choice, where the [XYZ] could be a towering statistician chosen by the community who opposed the science coming out of the eugenics movement at some level. Why the hyphenated name? In my opinion, it will serve two major purposes:

- (i) The hyphenated name will ensure that the community does not forget the eugenics past of statistics (which is the danger with the original proposal); after all, one cannot announce an award with a hyphenated name without explaining the need for two names on a single award.
- (ii) The change of name to a hyphenated one in which the first name is not of Fisher, as opposed to just a change in the description, will ensure that no one is mistaken that the community disassociates with Fisher's eugenics-related scientific contributions.