

HOW WOULD YOU IDENTIFY? THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Is race what other people think you are or what you think you are?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Discuss the definition of race and the concept of the social construction of race.
- Examine the U.S. Census Bureau's historic and current race categories and definitions.
- Investigate the ways in which Black people have been defined and categorized over time.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

45 minutes



MATERIALS

- *U.S. Census Bureau—About Race* handout (one copy to project or one copy per student)
- *Determine My Identity* handout (one copy per student)
- *Determine My Identity Answer Key* handout (one copy per student)
- Pew Research Center's *What Census Calls Us: A Historical Timeline* (one copy per student): https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PH_15.06.11_MultiRacial-Timeline.pdf



VOCABULARY

census

genetic

race

social construct

Procedures

1 Write the term “decennial census” on the board (decennial means occurring every 10 years). Have students engage in a turn and talk on what the census is and what specifically it measures. Highlight that one area the census surveys is racial identity. Project or distribute the handout *U.S. Census Bureau—About Race*, and read together. Answer any questions students may have.

2 Tell students they will engage in a brief quiz using the racial categories defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Distribute the *Determine My Identity* handout and have students complete it in pairs or small groups. When they are done, distribute the *Determine My Identity Answer Key*. Discuss the following questions as a class:

- What was challenging for you about this exercise?
- How did you decide what categories to assign to each person?
- What does it mean to “pass”? Why might some people choose to hide their racial identity?
- What did you learn from this exercise about race?

3 In their pairs or groups, ask students to discuss and write down their definition of race, taking into account any new knowledge based on the *Determine My Identity* exercise. Post the definition below and discuss the idea that race is a “social construct”—a set of categories created by people to make sense of their world, with no basis in science.

Race: A socially constructed (made up) category for grouping people, based on features like skin color, hair texture and eye shape.

NOTE

The U.S. Census Bureau identifies these categories of race: “White, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian and Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.” Some people might view some of these categories as ethnic rather than racial groups. Race categories are generally determined by physical characteristics, such as skin, eye and hair color and facial structure or characteristics. Ethnicity is usually associated with the culture of a geographic region, including language, nationality, religion, dress and customs. Because race and ethnicity are socially constructed, they are overlapping and subjective categories. They are not fixed, and our understanding of them is continually evolving.

NOTE

The racial categories we take for granted have no genetic basis. “There are no characteristics, no traits, not even one gene that distinguish all members of one so-called race from all members of another race.”¹ For more information, see “Race—The Power of an Illusion” at https://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm.

1 California Newsreel, “Race Literacy Quiz,” <http://newsreel.org/guides/race/quiz.htm>.



4 Distribute copies of the Pew Research Center’s *What Census Calls Us: A Historical Timeline*: https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PH_15.06.11_MultiRacial-Timeline.pdf. Post the question: “How does the history of the census show us that race is a social construct?” In their groups, have students discuss and annotate the handout, jotting notes and highlighting parts that answer the question.

5 Reconvene the class and discuss their findings. Emphasize how racial categories have shifted in response to politics, scientific trends and social attitudes, rather than being fixed or objective classifications. Highlight some of the following ideas:

- Before 1960, census takers identified a person’s perceived race, while after 1960, respondents could identify their own race.
- Over time, the definition of Black changed from someone with “one-fourth Black blood” (quadroon) to “one-eighth Black blood” (octoroon) to “one drop” of Black blood—a way to taint Black ancestry and protect white privilege.
- Beginning in 2000, respondents could identify themselves as more than one race.
- Beginning in 2020, the term “Negro” was eliminated, and all individuals are now asked to identify their racial origins (e.g., a Black person can indicate Nigerian or Haitian; a white person can indicate Irish or Polish).

6 Have students journal in response to one of the prompts below. If students feel safe, allow them to share and discuss their reflections with a partner. However, do not require students to share or submit their entries if they prefer to keep them private.

- Do you fit into the racial categories constructed by the U.S. Census Bureau or by our society? Explain.
- How do you define yourself racially? Is race an important part of your identity? Explain.
- Is there a difference between how you identify yourself racially and how others identify you? If so, describe the difference and how others’ assumptions have affected you.
- Is race what other people think you are or what you think you are? Explain.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What does it mean that race is a “social construct”? Why is race more “social” than “scientific”?
- 2 What are some examples of the way our society has shifted categories and definitions of race over time? What do you think has motivated or caused these changes?
- 3 How have Black people in particular been affected by society’s changing definitions of race?
- 4 How have you been personally affected by society’s racial categories and definitions?
- 5 Have you ever made assumptions related to another person’s race? What might be the problem with this?
- 6 Is it important to know another person’s race? What can you do if you are unsure of a person’s race?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + AAAS, “Variations in Human Skin Color,” <http://sciencenetlinks.com/lessons/variation-in-human-skin-color>.
- + Lind, Dara. “See every term the US Census has used to describe black Americans.” Last modified September 11, 2015. <https://www.vox.com/2015/6/11/8767179/census-history-race>.
- + Pastels and Crayons. *The Moth*. Podcast audio. December 15, 2016. https://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=16088.
- + PBS, “Race—The Power of an Illusion,” https://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm.