

# THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE: WHY IS IT AN ILLUSION?



## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Is race real? What are the dangers of categorizing people using the concept of race?



## OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Discuss the concept of “colorblindness” as a response to racism in our society.
- Explain why race is a social construct, with no basis in science.
- Examine the impact that categorizing people by race has had on humanity.
- Define the terms “race,” “racism” and “social construct.”



## LEARNING STANDARDS

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



## TIME NEEDED

60 minutes



## MATERIALS

- AV equipment to show a video
- *Video Response Guide* handout (one per student)
- *Race: The Power of an Illusion, Episode 1—The Difference Between Us* (video)
- *What is Race? / Is Race for Real?* handout (one per student)



## VOCABULARY

assumption	genetic	race	social construct
colorblindness	institutional	racism	

# Procedures

- 1 Prior to the lesson, post the following two quotes on opposite walls of the classroom:

“I don’t look at people and see color and race. I see inside.”  
—Jennifer Lopez, American actress, singer, dancer and businesswoman

“There’s this idea that people don’t see color, and that’s a lie. It’s about appreciating it, instead of pretending that it’s not there.” —Ali LeRoi, American television producer, director, writer and actor

- 2 Write the following question on the board: “Is race real?” Draw students’ attention to the two posted quotes. Have them stand near the quote—or at any point between the two—that represents their viewpoint. Ask for a few volunteers from different points on the continuum to share their opinions. Discuss some of the following questions:

- What are the positive intentions behind saying we don’t see race? What are some of the pitfalls of this way of thinking?
- When is it appropriate to “see race” or categorize people by race, and when is it problematic?
- Is race real or something artificial, constructed by society? What does race mean to you?

- 3 Tell students they will be watching a clip from a documentary that will further explore the way race has been used to categorize people. Distribute the *Video Response Guide* and review the instructions. Tell students they will have a “back-channel” discussion with their classmates at three intervals using the questions on the handout. This can be done via a back-channel site or app that allows students to respond in real time. If access to this type of technology is not available, follow these offline instructions:

## NOTE

Make sure students feel safe as they share their opinions about issues of race, and that the class discussion remains respectful and constructive. See [“Creating Brave Spaces”](#) at the beginning of the guide for guidelines on how to facilitate dialogue around sensitive topics.

- Create groups of three students and give each student three index cards.
- At the first interval, students use their notes from the handout to write a brief response to the designated question on one of their cards.
- They pass their cards around and allow their partners to react in writing. Students collect and review their own cards to see their peer's questions, comments and opinions.
- The process is repeated for all three sections of the video clip.

**4** Show *Race: The Power of an Illusion, Episode 1—The Difference Between Us* up to 10:00: <http://bit.ly/3dXo302>. Pause at the designated intervals so students can participate in the “back-channel” response activity. Following the video, allow students to share their reactions and questions as time allows, and help them clarify ideas presented in the film.

- 5** In small groups, have students come up with their own definitions for the following terms, based on prior knowledge and what they learned from the video: “race,” “racism” and “social construct.” Have students post their definitions and discuss as a class. Offer these definitions (project them on the board) and review with students:
- **Race:** A socially constructed category for grouping people, based on features like skin color, hair texture and eye shape
  - **Racism:** Prejudice or discrimination, based on race, directed against people with less social power by people with more social power in a society. Racism can be expressed by individuals through their beliefs, attitudes and actions. Racism can also be *institutional* or carried out through a system of laws, policies, practices and values that benefit those with more power and harm those with less power.
  - **Social construct:** An idea that has been created and accepted by the people in a society

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#### NOTE

Back-channel sites or apps allow students to have an on-line discussion in conjunction with a classroom activity. The website Common Sense Education offers recommendations on safe tools for classroom use: <https://www.commonsense.org/education/articles/3-backchanneling-websites-to-replace-to-daysmeet>.



## 6

Independently or in pairs, have students read the handout *What is Race? / Is Race for Real?* Direct them to annotate the text by writing thoughts or questions in the margins and highlighting at least three key ideas that resonate for them. Conduct a read-around in which each student reads aloud one phrase from the reading that is meaningful for them. Make certain that the following important ideas are communicated before concluding the lesson:

- Race is a social construct—it has no basis in science or nature.
- Race is a social reality—humanity has been sorted by race for centuries, and this has had real effects.
- Racial identity is real—it is a part of who we are, and often a source of pride and cultural connection.
- Racism is painful—prejudice and discrimination are very real consequences of racial hierarchy.
- Racism should be challenged—we can confront racial bias in ourselves and others, but only by “seeing” it.

# Discussion Questions

- 1 What do you think have been the historical dangers of classifying people based on race?
- 2 How do scientific studies challenge the notion of race? What is the “biological myth of race?”
- 3 The idea of race assumes that external differences (e.g., skin color) are linked to internal differences (e.g., intelligence). What false links are you aware of that people often create between race and other attributes?
- 4 How have assumptions and misconceptions about race become part of laws and policies?
- 5 If “race is not real,” why is “colorblindness” an inadequate outlook for one to adopt?
- 6 When is it appropriate to acknowledge others’ race and when is it a problem?
- 7 In your opinion, why has the “illusion” of race had such staying power in our world?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + California Newsreel, “Race—The Power of an Illusion,” <http://newsreel.org/video/race-the-power-of-an-illusion>.
- + Race Project, “The Human Spectrum: Where Do You Draw the Line?,” <https://www.understandingrace.org/TheHumanSpectrum>.
- + Wright, Daniel, “Black By Choice: The Story of Walter White, Mr. NAACP,” YouTube video, 9:52, February 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5cTUX-QADJM>.
- + Vox, “The myth of race, debunked in 3 minutes,” YouTube video, 3:07, January 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vn-fKgffCZ7U>.

# Lesson Extensions

- Show students the remainder of *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, Episode 1 and/or the other episodes: *Episode 2—The Story We Tell* (which explores the roots of the race concept in North America) and *Episode 3—The House We Live In* (which explores how race resides not in nature, but in social institutions that privilege whiteness). Visit [http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_General/000\\_00-Home.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm) for accompanying lessons and resources.