

# THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE: THE SKIN I AM IN



## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What makes our skin colors different? When is it appropriate to categorize or refer to people by skin color or race, and when is it not?



## OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explain when it is appropriate and when it is problematic to categorize people by race or skin color.
- Learn that race does not have a scientific basis, but that racism is real and hurtful.
- Describe personal experiences of prejudice based on race or skin color.
- Identify the scientific reasons for skin color variation.
- Create a mural that celebrates skin color diversity.



## LEARNING STANDARDS

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



## TIME NEEDED

60 minutes



## MATERIALS

- *All the Colors We Are, The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color* by Katie Kissinger (book, optional)
- Butcher paper and paints
- AV equipment to show a video (optional)



## VOCABULARY

genes/genetic  
race

identity  
racism

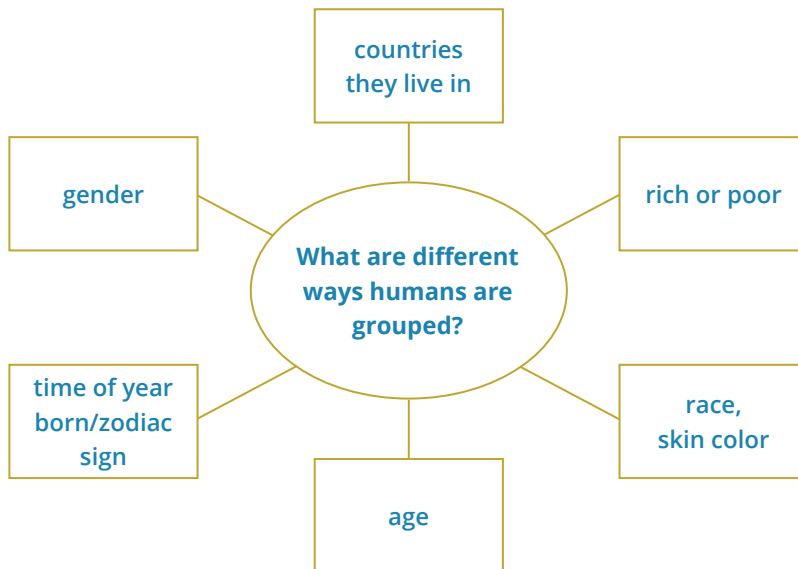
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# Procedures

## PART I

### Are Race Categories a Categorical Problem? (30 minutes)

- 1 Ask students: “What are some different ways humans are grouped?” Suggest, for example, that people are often sorted and described according to their gender. In small groups, have students create a concept map with what they think are the most common ways humans are categorized. Here is a sample of what they might come up with:



- 2 Have groups share ideas from their maps and briefly discuss similarities and differences. Comment that it is natural for us to categorize—it’s how we make sense of our world—but there are times when grouping people can lead to problems.

## 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 certain 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.

**3** Highlight the category “race” or “skin color” as an example (some groups will have likely included this category). Ask students what race is. After they have had a chance to share their thoughts, post this definition:

Race is a category that people use to group human beings, based on features like skin color, hair texture and eye shape.

Ask students for examples of racial categories (e.g., Black, white, Asian, Native American). Highlight that race categories don’t come from science or nature, but were created by people to make sense of their world.

**4** Pose the following question: “Is grouping people by race a *harmless* way to make sense of our world, or is it a *harmful* practice?” Discuss this with students, and make sure to highlight the following ideas as part of your conversation:

- It’s appropriate to sometimes categorize by race; for example, we might talk about Black leaders in history or great Native American stories, and many of us identify ourselves by a race that makes us feel proud or unique.
- When we label individuals using just race, however, we may not see all of the other unique qualities and identities they possess.
- When we place human beings into just a handful of race categories, we may not appreciate their full diversity—the many thousands of cultures, customs, languages, etc. that make up our world.

**5** If students have not already raised it, explain that racism is sometimes a problem when people are put into categories. Post this definition so all students have a common understanding of the term:

Racism is 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.

**6** Emphasize that racism is the biggest problem with race categories, and that when we make unfair or false assumptions about people based on their skin color, hair texture or eye shape, it can cause a lot of harm. Discuss some of the following questions:

- Has anyone ever made an assumption about you or someone you care about based on race? How did it affect you? (*Make sure no people are named, and that students only identify their own feelings.*)
- When we focus on a person's race, what other information do we lose about who they are as individuals?
- Do you think race is a good way to group people? Explain.

## PART II

### Skin Color is Skin Deep (30 minutes)


**7** Engage students in a think-pair-share using the following question: "If race doesn't come from science or nature, but was created by people, why do we have different skin colors?" Allow them to share their prior knowledge.

**8** To help students learn about the science of skin color, read aloud the book *All the Colors We Are, The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color* by Katie Kissinger, (more appropriate for younger students) or show the video *Why Do We Have Different Skin Colors?* [2:42], from the Kids Ask Why Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIYLTao54ss>. Discuss and/or have students write answers to the questions below.

- Why is it inaccurate to describe people as "Black" or "white"?
- What is the scientific explanation for skin color differences?
- What makes the pigment, melanin, more or less active in our bodies?
- How is skin color different from race?
- Does skin color tell us anything about a person other than skin color?

#### NOTE

This activity can be done as a whole class or in small groups using laptops or tablets. A read-aloud of *All the Colors We Are* is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O11hI9B9bzY>.

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- 9 Comment that we often categorize humankind into a few skin colors, such as black, white, and brown. Ask students how many skin colors there actually are. Show them the gallery of photos at <https://angelicadass.com/photography/humanae/>, which depicts more than 200 skin tones. Explain that the Humanæ Project, led by Brazilian photographer Angélica Dass, seeks to reveal the range and beauty of human colors because “small differences in skin tone can swell into large misconceptions and stereotypes about race.”
- 10 Have students create a class mural of handprints representing the “beauty of their human colors.” After mixing paints to create a hue that reflects their skin tone, students paint their palms and fingertips and press them onto a large sheet of butcher paper. When it dries, students add their names and one unique fact about them that is more than “skin deep.” Have the class determine a fitting title for their mural and display it in the classroom.

# Discussion Questions

- 1 When is it okay to categorize or refer to people by race or skin color? When is it a problem?
- 2 Why do you think people started categorizing others by race or skin color in the first place? What are some examples of damage this has caused in the world?
- 3 Is your skin color an important part of your identity? Does it influence who you are? Explain.
- 4 Have you or has someone you know been affected by prejudice based on skin color? What happened, and how did it make you feel?
- 5 How might you use your knowledge of the science behind skin color to respond to racist ideas you hear?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + “Looking at Skin Color with Books and Activities,” Welcoming Schools, <https://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/looking-at-skin-color-with-books-and-activities>.
- + Pastels and Crayons. *The Moth*. Podcast audio. December 15, 2016. [https://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD\\_AND\\_PLAY&storyId=16088](https://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=16088).
- + “Race—The Power of an Illusion,” PBS, [http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_General/000\\_00-Home.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm).
- + TED-Ed. “The Science of Skin Color,” YouTube video, 4:53, February 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4c2NT4naQ&feature=youtu.be>.
- + “Understanding Race,” The American Anthropological Association. <https://understandingrace.org/>
- + “Ten Things Everyone Should Know About Race,” California Newsreel, <http://newsreel.org/guides/race/10things.htm>.