

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.



U.S. Census Bureau—About Race¹

NAME: _____

[The] U.S. Census is designed to count every resident in the United States. It is mandated by Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution and takes place every 10 years. The data collected by the decennial census determine the number of seats each state has in the U.S. House of Representatives... [It] tells us who we are and where we are going as a nation, and helps our communities determine where to build everything from schools to supermarkets, and from homes to hospitals. It helps the government decide how to distribute funds and assistance to states and localities.

What is Race?

The racial categories included in the census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically...or genetically... People may choose to report more than one race to indicate their racial mixture, such as "American Indian" and "White." People who identify their origin as Hispanic, Latino or Spanish may be of any race... The Census Bureau does not tell individuals which boxes to mark or what heritage to write in.

The U.S. government requires five minimum categories [of race]:

- **White**—A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa
- **Black or African American**—A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa
- **American Indian or Alaska Native**—A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment
- **Asian**—A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam
- **Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander**—A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands

¹ The text on this handout is taken from: U.S. Census Bureau, "Decennial Census," <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/censuses.html>; "About Race," <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>.



Determine My Identity

Use the U.S. Census Bureau definitions to identify the race of the following individuals.

- A. White
- B. Black or African American
- C. American Indian and Alaska Native
- D. Asian
- E. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- F. Some other race
- G. Two or more races



1 Walter White



2 Mary Church Terrell



3 Homer Plessy



4 George J. Herriman



5 Timothy Thomas Fortune



6 Lena Horne



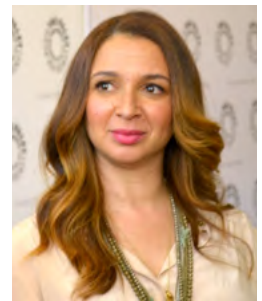
7 Jean Toomer



8 Rashida Jones



9 Shirley Graham Du Bois



10 Maya Rudolf

IMAGE CREDITS

Images are from Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository (accessed April 13, 2020):

- Walter F White, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Walter_F_White.jpg&oldid=252157617
- Mary Church Terrell, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mary_church_terrell.jpg
- Homerplessy02.jpg, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Homerplessy02.jpg&oldid=335784048>
- Herriman 1902, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Herriman_1902.png
- Timothy Thomas Fortune 2, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Timothy_Thomas_Fortune_2.JPG&oldid=203846692
- Lena Horne 1955, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Lena_Horne_1955.JPG&oldid=110563391
- Jean Toomer passport 1926, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Jean_Toomer_passport_1926.jpg&oldid=149371887
- Rashida Jones (7116540149), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rashida_Jones_\(7116540149\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rashida_Jones_(7116540149).jpg)
- Portrait of Shirley Graham, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Portrait_of_Shirley_Graham.jpg&oldid=294718698
- Maya Rudolph at the "Up All Night" Cast at Paley Center. 2012. MingleMediaTVNetwork, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Ma-ya_Rudolph.jpg&oldid=289182462



Determine My Identity Answer Key

Below are brief biographies of each of the people in the quiz. The information about their racial and ethnic backgrounds shows how problematic it is to fit people into the racial categories society has created. Although these people were of mixed ancestry, most were treated as Black and therefore subject to the discrimination faced by Black people. Many had lived experiences and/or self-identified as Black or African American. Several were able to “pass” as white and chose to live at least part of their lives as white people.

- 1 Walter White** (1893–1955) was a civil rights activist, who led the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and investigated lynchings in the South. White was of mixed African and European ancestry. He sometimes passed as white to protect himself when investigating racism. “I am a Negro,” he said of himself. “My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me.”
- 2 Mary Church Terrell** (1863–1954) was one of the first African American women to earn a college degree and became known as a national activist for civil rights and suffrage. Her parents were both freed enslaved people of mixed racial ancestry, including Black, white, and Austronesian (from Madagascar in the Indian Ocean) people. Her autobiography was entitled, *A Colored Woman in a White World*.
- 3 Homer Plessy** (1862–1925) was a French-speaking Creole from Louisiana and the plaintiff in the famous U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which he argued that being forced to sit in the Black car of a train was unconstitutional. The Court held that “separate but equal” racial facilities were legal. Plessy was an “octoroon” or one-eighth Black. His family, both Black and white, came to the U.S. from Haiti and France.
- 4 George J. Herriman** (1880–1944) was an American cartoonist, best known for the comic strip, “Krazy Kat.” He was born to a family of mixed-race French-speaking Louisiana Creole “mulattoes,” and one of his grandmothers was Cuban. Herriman’s birth certificate lists him as “colored” and his death certificate as “Caucasian.” He may have passed as white for part of his adult life.
- 5 Timothy Thomas Fortune** (1856–1928) was an African American civil rights leader, journalist and publisher. He was the editor of the nation’s leading Black newspaper, *The New York Age*, and was a leading economist in the Black community. Fortune was born into slavery and freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.
- 6 Lena Horne** (1917–2010) was an American singer, dancer, actress and civil rights activist. Her career in film, television and theater spanned over 70 years. Horne’s family was of African, Native American and European descent. “I was unique,” she said, “in that I was a kind of Black that white people could accept.”
- 7 Jean Toomer** (1894–1967) was a school principal in Georgia, and a poet and novelist associated with the Harlem Renaissance. His parents were both mixed-race and he was majority white in his ancestry. Toomer was classified as white on the 1920 and 1930 censuses and on his marriage license, and as “Negro” on draft registrations in 1917 and 1942. He passed as white for periods of his life, but claimed he was not bound by race and was simply an American.
- 8 Rashida Jones** (1976–) is an American actress, writer and producer, and the daughter of musician Quincy Jones. Her father is African American with roots in Cameroon and a paternal Welsh grandfather. Her mother was an Ashkenazi (European) Jew. Jones has said she identifies with being Black and biracial. She has also commented, “I have gone through periods where I only feel Black or Jewish. Now I have a good balance.”
- 9 Shirley Graham Du Bois** (1896–1977) was an American author, playwright, composer and activist for African American and other causes. Her father was an African Methodist Episcopal minister and her mother was European.
- 10 Maya Rudolph** (1972–) is an American actress who has been a cast member of *Saturday Night Live* and appeared in many movies. Her mother was African American and her father is white and Jewish. Rudolph has said she never felt either Black or white and identified most with biracial people of any race. “I just never felt like that was the first place to go,” she has commented, “to define myself by race.”