

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-backchannel-ing-websites-to-replace-to-daysmeet>.



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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://voicesfromloysville.blogspot.com/2007/04/human-spectrum-where-do-you-draw-line.html>.
- + 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 for accompanying lessons and resources.



Video Response Guide

Race: The Power of an Illusion

NAME: _____

As you watch the video, take notes that will help you respond to the questions below. The video will stop at each point indicated, and you will have a chance to react to that section of the film and to share ideas with your partners.

[2:45] *"We can't find any genetic markers that are in everybody of a particular race and nobody of some other race; we can't find any genetic markers that define race."*

→ What is your reaction to the idea that race is a biological and genetic myth?

[7:00] *"The way it all falls out tends to point to what your race is."*

→ What assumptions do the students in the video make about race? What assumptions have you or people you know made? What are the dangers of these assumptions?

[10:00] *"We have a long history of searching for racial differences and attributing performance and behavior to them."*

→ How is race "an illusion"? What has motivated people to classify humans in this way? What has powered this false idea for centuries?



What is Race? / Is Race for Real?

NAME: _____

- 1 Race is a modern idea.** Ancient societies did not divide people according to physical differences, but according to religion, status, class and even language.
- 2 Race has no genetic basis.** Not one characteristic, trait or gene distinguishes all members of one so-called race from all members of another so-called race.
- 3 Slavery predates race.** Throughout history, societies have enslaved others, often as a result of conquest or war, but not because of physical characteristics or a belief in natural inferiority. In America, a unique set of circumstances led to the enslavement of peoples who looked similar.
- 4 Race and freedom were born together.** When the United States was founded, equality was a radical new idea. But our early economy was based largely on slavery. The concept of race helped explain why some people could be denied the rights and freedoms that others took for granted.
- 5 Race justified social inequalities as natural.** As the race concept evolved, it justified the extermination of Native Americans, the exclusion of Asian immigrants and the taking of Mexican lands. Racial practices were institutionalized within government, laws and society.
- 6 Human subspecies don't exist.** Unlike many animals, modern humans have not been isolated enough to evolve into separate subspecies or races. Despite surface differences, we are among the most similar of all species.
- 7 Skin color is only skin deep.** Most traits are inherited independent of one another. The genes for skin color have nothing to do with genes for hair texture, eye shape, blood type, musical talent or athletic ability.
- 8 Most variation is within, not between "races."** Of the small amount of total human genetic variation, 85% exists within any local population, be they Italians, Kurds, Koreans or Cherokees. Two random Koreans are likely to be as genetically different as a Korean and an Italian.
- 9 Race is not biological but racism is still real.** Race is still a powerful social idea that gives people different access to opportunities and resources. Our government and society have created advantages of being white. This affects everyone, whether we are aware of it or not.
- 10 Colorblindness will not end racism.** Pretending race doesn't exist is not the same as creating equality. Racism is more than stereotypes and individual prejudice. To combat racism, we need to identify and remedy social policies that advantage some groups at the expense of others.

SOURCE: PBS, "What is Race? / Is Race for Real?," https://www.pbs.org/race/001_WhatsRace/001_00-home.htm.

What have been the consequences of social constructs about race in our country?

Though there is no biological basis for race, centuries of deeply ingrained ideology about the differentness of the “races” has led to vast racial and ethnic inequalities in the United States. People of color face structural barriers daily in the form of laws and policies governing education, housing, voting rights and much more.

The 1954 landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* ended the almost 60-year precedent of “separate but equal” in U.S. law. For the Browns and millions of other people whose children were forced to attend segregated schools, their education was anything but equal. Today, schools are much improved, yet disparities perpetuate. According to the UCLA Civil Rights Project, “intense levels of segregation” have been on the rise since the 1990s, when court decisions nationwide began releasing schools from desegregation orders and plans. Their research shows that about 15 percent of Black and Hispanic students today attend so-called “apartheid schools” that are less than 1 percent white—levels of segregation today have not been seen since the 1960s. “These trends matter,” notes a project report, “[because] segregation has strong, negative relationships with the achievement, college success, long-term employment and income of students of color.”¹

Housing policy and trends similarly show the persistent nature of segregation and racial inequality. Beginning in the 1930s, there was a series of systematic policy decisions that reinforced and expanded residential segregation. During this era, for example, the notorious practice of “redlining” began, in which federal underwriters drew red lines around poor, mostly Black neighborhoods on zoning maps and marked them as “hazardous” or too risky for bank loans. After World War II, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) guaranteed mortgages for thousands of single-family homes in new suburbs, but prohibited the awarding of loans for homes in or near neighborhoods with “incompatible racial elements.” In 2018, Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting exposed that redlining still occurs today, despite the 1968 Fair Housing Act banning this form of discrimination.² In fact, more than 50 years after that historic legislation, U.S. communities are just as segregated and struggling with many of the same problems, including inequality in mortgage lending and homeownership. In addition to being unjust, these practices have a “negative impact on everything from the quality of education Black children receive to the health and longevity of their parents.”³

1 Gary Orfield, Erica Frankenberg, Jongyeon Ee, Jennifer B. Ayscue, “Harming Our Common Future: America’s Segregated Schools 65 Years after Brown,” UCLA Civil Rights Project, May 10, 2019, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/23j1b9nv>.

2 Aaron Glantz and Emmanuel Martinez, “For people of color, banks are shutting the door to homeownership,” Reveal, February 15, 2018, <https://www.revealnews.org/article/for-people-of-color-banks-are-shutting-the-door-to-homeownership>.

3 Joseph P. Williams, “Segregation’s Legacy: Fifty years after the Fair Housing Act was signed, America is nearly as segregated as when President Lyndon Johnson signed the law,” U.S. News & World Report, April 20, 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2018-04-20/us-is-still-segregated-even-after-fair-housing-act>.

Nothing is more fundamental to U.S. democracy than the right to vote. However, since the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870, granting Black men the right to vote, a host of discriminatory laws, policies and practices have ensued, aimed at depressing this right. These practices included poll taxes and literacy tests, as well as campaigns of violence and intimidation. It was not until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 that these discriminatory laws and practices were outlawed and tens of millions of people of color were enfranchised for the first time. In 2012, the national voter turnout rate among Black citizens exceeded that of white citizens for the first time in U.S. history.⁴ Yet in recent years, a new wave of voter suppression efforts, targeted mostly at people of color, threaten our democracy. Court rulings eliminating core voting protections have paved the way for voter ID laws, voter roll purges and felony disenfranchisement. According to the Center for American Progress, in 2017 “Native Americans, Latinos, and African Americans were two, three, and four times, respectively, more likely than their white counterparts to report experiencing racial discrimination when trying to vote or participate in politics.”⁵

In his speech on race, then Senator Barack Obama commented: “...for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn’t make it—those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination.” This is the legacy of structural inequality, the use of laws, policies and discriminatory practices by those in power to keep some groups from obtaining the resources and opportunities needed to attain their American dream.

4 Jens Manuel Krogstad and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Black voter turnout fell in 2016, even as a record number of Americans cast ballots,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/12/black-voter-turnout-fell-in-2016-even-as-a-record-number-of-americans-cast-ballots>.

5 Danyelle Solomon, Connor Maxwell and Abril Castro, “Systematic Inequality and American Democracy,” Center for American Progress, August 7, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/473003/systematic-inequality-american-democracy>