

RACE - The Power of an Illusion (www.pbs.org/race).

“Race is not based on biology, but race is rather an idea that we ascribe to biology.” - Alan Goodman, biological anthropologist

“There’s as much or more diversity and genetic difference within any racial group as there is between people of different racial groups.” - Pilar Ossorio, microbiologist

“Every single one of us is a mongrel.” – student

“Race was never just a matter of how you look, it’s about how people assign meaning to how you look.” - Robin D. G. Kelley, historian

“The slick thing about whiteness is that you can reap the benefits of a racist society without personally being racist.” - John A. Powell, legal scholar

“That melting pot never included people of color. Blacks, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, etc. could not melt into the pot.” - Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, sociologist

RACE - The Power of an Illusion is a provocative three-hour series that questions the very idea of race as biology. Scientists tell us that believing in biological races is no more sound than believing the sun revolves around the earth. So if race is a biological myth, where did the idea come from? And why should it matter today? RACE - The Power of an Illusion provides an eye-opening discussion tool to help people examine their beliefs about race, privilege, policy, and justice.

Episode I - “The Difference Between Us” examines how recent scientific discoveries have toppled the concept of biological race. The program follows a dozen diverse students who sequence and compare their own DNA. They discover, to their surprise, that their closest genetic matches are as likely to be with people from other “races” as their own. The episode helps us understand why it doesn’t make scientific or genetic sense to sort people into biological races, as it dismantles our most basic myths about race, including natural superiority and inferiority.

Episode II - “The Story We Tell” uncovers the roots of the race concept, including the 19th-century science that legitimated it and the hold it has gained over our minds. It’s an eye-opening tale of how America’s need to defend slavery in the face of a radical new belief in freedom and equality led to a full-blown ideology of white supremacy. Noting the experience of Cherokee Indians, the U.S. war against Mexico and annexation of the Philippines, the film shows how definitions of race excluded from humanity not only Black people, but anyone who stood in the way of American expansion. The program traces the transformation of tentative suspicions about difference into a “common-sense” wisdom that people used to explain everything from individual behavior to the fate of whole societies, an idea of race that persists to this day.

Episode III - “The House We Live In” focuses not on individual behaviors and attitudes, but on how our institutions shape and create race, giving different groups vastly unequal life chances. Who defines race? In the early 20th century, the courts were called upon to determine who was white, employing contradictory logic to maintain the color line. After World War II, government policies and subsidies helped create segregated suburbs where Italians, Jews and other not-quite-white European ethnics were able to reap the full advantages of whiteness. The episode reveals some of the ordinary social institutions that quietly channel wealth and opportunity, so that white people benefit from a racist system without personally being racist. It concludes by looking at why we can’t just get rid of race.

Ten Things Everyone Should Know about Race

1. Race is a modern idea. Ancient societies, like the Greeks, did not divide people according to physical differences, but according to religion, status, class or even language. The English word “race” turns up for the first time in a 1508 poem by William Dunbar referring to a line of kings.
2. Race has no genetic basis. Not one characteristic, trait or even gene distinguishes all the members of one so-called race from all the members of another so-called race.
3. Human subspecies don’t exist. Unlike many animals, modern humans simply haven’t been around long enough, nor have populations been isolated enough, to evolve into separate subspecies or races. On average, only one of every thousand of the nucleotides that make up our DNA differ one human from another. We are one of the most genetically similar of all species.
4. Skin color really is only skin deep. The genes for skin color have nothing to do with genes for hair form, eye shape, blood type, musical talent, athletic ability or forms of intelligence. Knowing someone’s skin color doesn’t necessarily tell you anything else about them.
5. Most variation is within, not between, “races.” Of the small amount of total human variation, 85% exists within any local population. About 94% can be found within any continent. That means, for example, that two random Koreans may be as genetically different as a Korean and an Italian.
6. Slavery predates race. Throughout much of human history, societies have enslaved others, often as a result of conquest or debt, but not because of physical characteristics or a belief in natural inferiority. Due to a unique set of historical circumstances, North America has the first slave system where all slaves shared a common appearance and ancestry.
7. Race and freedom were born together. The U.S. was founded on the principle that “All men are created equal,” but the country’s early economy was based largely on slavery. The new idea of race helped explain why some people could be denied the rights and freedoms that others took for granted.
8. Race justified social inequalities as natural. The “common sense” belief in white superiority justified anti-democratic action and policies like slavery, the extermination of American Indians, the exclusion of Asian immigrants, the taking of Mexican lands, and the institutionalization of racial practices within American government, laws, and society.
9. Race isn’t biological, but racism is still real. Race is a powerful social idea that gives people different access to opportunities and resources. The government and social institutions of the United States have created advantages that disproportionately channel wealth, power and resources to white people.
10. Colorblindness will not end racism. Pretending race doesn’t exist is not the same as creating equality.

Questions for Episode I - The Difference Between Us

1. How would you define race? What does it mean to you?
2. How many races do you think there are? What are they? How do you decide which race someone belongs to?
3. Look around the room or around your community. Who do you think is likely to be most similar to you, biologically or genetically? Why?
4. Where do your ideas about race come from? What are the sources of your information?
5. What is the difference between a biological and a social view of race?
6. Excluding your immediate family members, are you more likely to be genetically like someone who looks like you or someone who does not?
7. Why is it impossible to use biological characteristics to sort people into consistent races? Review some of the concepts such as “non-concordance” and “within-group vs. between group variation.”
8. Who has benefited from the belief that we can sort people according to race and that there are natural or biologically based differences between racial groups?
9. Besides race, what other things explain why some people might be more susceptible than others to disease? Think about the girl in the film with sickle cell anemia. How is ancestry different from race?
10. Anthropologist Alan Goodman says that “to understand why the idea of race is a biological myth requires a major paradigm shift.” Do you agree? Did the film present anything that shifted your thinking in a major way? If so, what? Is it difficult to make this shift? Why?

11. Should doctors and other health professionals take biological race into account when diagnosing and treating illness? Why? Can you think of a situation where thinking about race as biological might be misleading or have a negative effect? How would considering social race be different?
12. Would you trade your skin color? How do you think your life would be different if you looked like someone of a different race? Turn-of-the-century scientists like Frederick Hoffman drew scientific conclusions based on what they believed to be true. How are scientists today influenced by their beliefs or their social context?
13. Athletics is one arena where talking about ideas of inborn racial differences remains common. Why do you think some populations or groups seem to dominate certain sports but not others? What does it mean that the groups that dominate those sports have changed over time?

Questions for Episode II-The Story We Tell

1. How long do you think the idea of race has been around? Where did it come from?
2. Do you think Africans were enslaved in the Americas because they were deemed inferior, or were they deemed inferior because they were enslaved?
3. What are some ways that race has been used to rationalize inequality? How has race been used to shift attention (and responsibility) away from oppressors and toward the targets of oppression?
4. What is the connection of American slavery to prejudices against African-descended peoples? Why does race persist after abolition?
5. Why was it not slavery but freedom and the notion that “all men are created equal” that created a moral contradiction in colonial America, and how did race help resolve that contradiction?
6. Contrast Thomas Jefferson’s policy to assimilate American Indians in the 1780s with Andrew Jackson’s policy of removing Cherokees to west of the Mississippi in the 1830s. What is common to both policies? What differentiates them?
7. What did the publications of scientists Louis Agassiz, Samuel Morton, and Josiah Nott argue, and what was their impact on U.S. legal and social policy?
8. What role did beliefs about race play in the American colonization of Mexican territory, Cuba, the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico?
9. What are the stories about race that you tell? What are the stories you have heard? Did the film change the way you think about those stories? If so, how?
10. In your community, who is seen as “different”? What characterizes those who are defined as different? James Horton points out that colonial white Americans invented the story that “there’s something different about ‘those’ people” in order to rationalize believing in the contradictory ideas of equality and slavery at the same time. Likewise, historian Reginald Horsman shows how the explanation continued to be used to resolve other dilemmas: “This successful republic is not destroying Indians just for the love of it, they’re not enslaving Blacks because they are selfish, they’re not overrunning Mexican lands because they are avaricious. This is part of some great inevitability... of the way races are constituted.” What stories of difference are used to mask or cover up oppression today? Why do we need to tell ourselves these kinds of stories?
11. How did expanding democracy and giving opportunities to more white men intersect with American society becoming increasingly “race based”? How did racism benefit white men? Are these practices still the case today? Is there an inevitable trade-off where one group gains privilege at the expense of another or can reversing racial inequality benefit all people, including white people who have traditionally benefited from racism? What might that look like?
12. Historian Matthew P. Guterl observes, “Most Americans believed that race was one of the most important parts of national life; that race mattered because it guaranteed this country a [glorious] future in the history of the world.” While few would admit it today, do you think the definition of progress is still tied to being white? Can you think of historical or current instances in which those who are not defined as white are blamed for American weakness or problems?
13. How was the notion of Manifest Destiny shaped by beliefs about race? What is the relationship of Manifest Destiny to current foreign policies? Compare current responses to racial inequity - e.g., calls for reparations or affirmative action - with the response of those who believed in the “White Man’s Burden.” Which solutions reinforce biological notions of race and/or white superiority? Which acknowledge the social construct of race

without reinforcing those myths? Is it possible to address racial inequities without reinforcing biological notions of race? If so, how?

Questions for Episode III-The House We Live In

1. Does race affect your life? Why or why not? If so, in what ways? Forty years ago, the Civil Rights Act declared that forced racial segregation was illegal. In light of this, why do you think some neighborhoods, schools and workplaces are still segregated?
2. What stereotypes have you heard or seen about different racial groups? Where do they come from?
3. Do you think people today should be held accountable for past discrimination? Why or why not?
4. Define “racial preferences.” List a couple of current examples. Do the preferences you see in practice today tend to most benefit whites, Blacks, or others?
5. Who was allowed to become a naturalized citizen before 1954 and who wasn’t? What rights and privileges do citizens have that non-citizens don’t have? What were the consequences for those denied citizenship?
6. How did European “ethnics” become white? What changes made this possible?
7. How did federal housing policies institutionalize segregation and wealth disparities?
8. Why do property values go down when a neighborhood changes from white to nonwhite? Who plays a role in this?
9. What happens to measures of racial disparities in places like education and welfare rates when groups of similar income and wealth are compared?
10. Government policies have created unfair advantages for whites in the past, resulting in a substantial wealth gap between whites and nonwhites. What examples of disparity exist in your community today? Will the wealth gap go away if we ignore race?
11. In the early part of this century, Asian immigrants were not eligible for citizenship, no matter how long they lived in the U.S. What is the legacy of those laws in terms of how Asian Americans are viewed today? What role does race play in current U.S. policy on immigration and granting of citizenship? How is our idea of citizenship still tied to race?
12. Think about the phrase “melting pot” - what does it imply? If this does not appropriately describe the U.S., what phrase would aptly describe the relationship between its various peoples?
13. Central to the concept of the American Dream is the notion that anyone who works hard enough will be rewarded-that anyone can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” How has this been made more difficult for people not defined as white? What is the long-term impact of that denial? What difference does access to financial resources make in terms of your life opportunities?
14. Cartoonist Bill Griffith comments on the all-white suburb where he grew up: “It certainly doesn’t promote a feeling of a wider world to live in a place where there are only people who look like you.” Do you agree? What does your neighborhood, workplace or school look like? Should geographical integration be a goal of public policy? Why or why not?
15. Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum summarizes the impact of institutionalized racial policies like FHA loan practices: “To the child of that parent, it looks like, ‘My father worked hard, bought a house, passed his wealth on to me, made it possible for me to go to school....How come your father didn’t do that?’“ How would you answer the child of that privileged parent? How would you explain the situation to the child of the parent who was disadvantaged by government policies?
16. Supreme Court Justice Henry Blackmun said, “To get beyond racism we must first take account of race. There is no other way.” Do you agree? Contrast Blackmun’s statement with people who strive to be “colorblind” and judge people by the “content of their character rather than the color of their skin.” Who benefits if we adopt a colorblind approach to society? How is colorblindness different from equality?
17. Given that race isn’t biological, should we get rid of racial categories? Why might racial classifications still be useful? If we stop tracking racial information, how will we tell if disparities still exist?