

LESSON 4: Race and Identity

Central Questions

- How does race shape the way we see ourselves and others?
- To what extent do our ideas about race influence the choices we make?

Getting Started

Remind students that race is one part of a person's identity. Yet Susie Phipps considered it so important that she spent \$20,000 trying to change the way Louisiana determined her race. What is *race*? What does Phipps's legal battle suggest about its importance in the United States in the 1970s? How important is your race to your identity? If students have difficulty expressing their ideas about race, you may want to read aloud to them from picture books about race created for young children. A good example is *Let's Talk about Race* written by Julius Lester and illustrated by Karen Barbour (HarperCollins, 2005). Lester relates his ideas about race to his own identity.

Background Information

In 1997, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) wrote a statement on race:
Physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social [meanings] that humans put on them. Today, scholars in many fields argue that race as it is understood in the USA was a social mechanism invented during the 18th century to refer to those populations brought together in colonial America: the English and other European settlers, the conquered Indian peoples, and those peoples of Africa brought to provide slave labor.

The report notes that in the early 1800s slaveholders justified slavery by magnifying differences among Europeans, Africans, and American Indians and insisting that those differences were "God-given." A number of scientists incorporated these mistaken notions about human differences into their research. Eventually these myths about race spread to other areas of the world where they "became a strategy for dividing, ranking and controlling colonized people." But racist thinking was not limited to the "colonial situation."

The report goes on to say:

In the latter part of the 19th century, [race] was employed by Europeans to rank one another and to justify social, economic, and political inequalities among their peoples. During World War II, the Nazis under Adolf Hitler enjoined the expanded ideology of race and racial differences and took them to a logical end: the extermination of 11 million people of "inferior races"... and other unspeakable brutalities of the Holocaust.

Race thus evolved as a world view, a body of prejudgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior... Racial myths bear no relationship to the reality of human capabilities or behavior. Scientists today find that reliance on such folk beliefs about human difference in research has led to countless errors.³

In short, race is skin deep. Yet, writes anthropologist Jared Diamond, “Most people regard the existence of race as obvious, a matter of common sense even though ‘science often violates simple common sense.’” He explains:

Our eyes tell us that the Earth is flat, that the sun revolves around the Earth, and that we humans are not animals. But we now ignore that evidence of our senses. We have learned that our planet is in fact round and revolves around the sun, and that humans are slightly modified chimpanzees. The reality of human races is another commonsense “truth” destined to follow the flat Earth into oblivion.⁴

Activity: Analyzing Ideas about Race and Racism

Write the word *race* on the board and draw a circle around it. Ask students to create a web by listing the words, phrases, or ideas they associate with the word. (If you read Lester’s book to the class, students may wish to include his ideas as well.) Explain to students that many scholars, scientists, and writers have also thought about the word and its meaning. Distribute **Reproducible 1.4** and ask students to read the definitions. What do they add to our understanding of race? Point out that the authors of the first definition of race on the reproducible has put into **bold** key phrases and ideas. Ask students to work with a partner and underline key phrases and ideas in the other definitions. Have the class add those understandings to their web as well.

After students have read and discussed their ideas about race, read aloud the following paragraph from *Let’s Talk about Race*. Julius Lester writes:

Just as I am a story and you are a story and countries tell stories about themselves, race is a story, too. Whether you’re black like me, or Asian, Hispanic, or white, each race has a story about itself. And that story is almost always the same:

“MY RACE IS BETTER THAN YOUR RACE.”

Some stories are true. Some are not.

Those who say

“MY RACE IS BETTER THAN YOUR RACE”

are telling a story that is not true.⁵

⁴ “The American Anthropological Association Preliminary Statement on Race.” *Anthropology Newsletter*, April 1997, p.1.

⁵ Jared Diamond, “Race without Color”. *Discover*, November 1994, p. 82–89.

⁶ Julius Lester, *Let’s Talk about Race*. HarperCollins, 2005.

Ask students to use their web to explain the lesson Lester wants his readers to learn. Explain that those who say “My race is better than your race” believe in *racism*. Ask students to work in pairs to create a visual definition of racism. Post the definitions around the classroom and allow students time to look at one another’s work. What do the pictures suggest about the meanings of both *race* and *racism*?

Activity: Expressing a Point of View

Ask students to read **Reproducible 1.5** and then answer the questions at the end of the reading. Their answers should show an understanding of how identity shapes perception (questions 1 and 2), and how stereotypes are formed (question 3) and how they can be overcome (question 4).

Writing Suggestions

Create working definitions of race and racism. A working definition begins with what a word or term means to you. Then add the meanings explored in your reading. Continue to add definitions as the unit continues.

Reproducible 1.4**Page 1 of 2**

The Meanings of Race

Read each definition of race and underline key phrases and ideas. You will use those phrases and ideas to create a web about race.

Definition 1

The Only Race Is the Human Race

No Biological Basis for Race

New data from the mapping of the human genome reveal that all humans are incredibly similar — in fact, we are 99.9% genetically identical. **We are all members of one species, *Homo sapiens*.** Scientists have confirmed, as they long suspected, **that there is no genetic or biological basis for race.**

Genetic variation between people within the same “racial” group can be greater than the variation between people of two different groups. Many people of African descent are no more similar to other Africans than they are to Caucasians. Genetic distinctions between Asians and Caucasians are less pronounced than those between groups from, for example, parts of East and West Africa.

No matter how scientists today scrutinize a person’s genes, they can’t determine with certainty whether an individual is from one “racial” group or another.

Differences of culture and society distinguish one group from another, but these distinctions are not rooted in biology.

“Mapping the DNA sequence variation in the human genome holds the potential for promoting the fundamental unity of all mankind.” —Dr. Harold P. Freeman

(American Museum of Natural History, “The Genomic Revolution,” 2001 exhibition.)

Definition 2

In 1997, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) issued a statement summarizing its own research and the research of others on race. After noting that race has no scientific meaning and that research based on racial categories has resulted in “countless errors,” the organization concluded that race is a social invention — “a worldview, a body of pre-judgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior.” The AAA noted, “At the end of the 20th century, we now understand that human behavior is learned, conditioned into infants beginning at birth and always subject to modification and change.”

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Reproducible 1.4**Page 2 of 2****Definition 3**

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary

race *n* a division of mankind possessing traits that are transmissible by descent and sufficient to characterize it as a distinct human type

Definition 4

Poet Lori Tsang:

Race is the myth upon which the reality of racism is based, the wild card the racist always keeps up his sleeve. The racist has the power to determine whether the card will be a diamond or spade, whether a Chinese is black or white. Like water, race takes on the shape of whatever contains it — whatever culture, social structure, political system. But like water, it slips through your fingers when you try to hold it.*

*Quoted in Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn, ed., *Half and Half*. Pantheon Books, 1998, pp. 209–210.

Reproducible 1.5**“Those Who Don’t”**

In the story "Those Who Don't" from Sandra Cisneros's novel *House on Mango Street*, the main character, Esperanza, shares how she feels the people in her neighborhood are defined by outsiders. Read the excerpt located in Chapter 12, beginning with "Those who don't . . ." and ending with ". . . goes and goes."

1. List the stereotypes that *they* have of us.
2. List the stereotypes that *we* have of *them*.
3. Where does the author think the stereotypes she describes come from?
Where do you think they come from?
4. Write a paragraph explaining what can be done to stop stereotyping.
Give your opinion in the first sentence. The sentences that follow should provide an argument in support of your opinion.