

## National Museum of African American History and Culture Talking about Race Web Portal

This is the text from the Talking About Race website supplemented with excerpts from imbedded links *inserted in italics*.

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<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/race-and-racial-identity>



# Race and Racial Identity

**Although race has no genetic or scientific basis, the concept of race is important and consequential. Societies use race to establish and justify systems of power, privilege, disenfranchisement, and oppression.**

The notion of race is a social construct designed to divide people into groups ranked as superior and inferior. The scientific consensus is that race, in this sense, has no biological basis – we are all one race, the human race. *Racial identity*, however, is very real. And, in a racialized society like the United States, *everyone* is assigned a racial identity whether they are aware of it or not.

### Race as Social Construction

The dictionary's definition of race is incomplete and misses the complexity of impact on lived experiences. It is important to acknowledge race is a social fabrication, created to classify people on the arbitrary basis of skin color and other physical features. Although race has no genetic or scientific basis, the concept of race is important and consequential. Societies use race to establish and justify systems of power, privilege, disenfranchisement, and oppression.

**American Anthropological Association** states that "the 'racial' worldview was invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power, and wealth. The tragedy in the United States has been that the policies and practices stemming from this worldview succeeded all too well in constructing unequal populations among Europeans, Native Americans, and peoples of African descent." *The full AAPA statement on race and racism can be found at <https://physanth.org/about/position-statements/aapa-statement-race-and-racism-2>.*

*Following is the executive summary:*

### ***Executive Summary of the AAPA Statement on Race and Racism***

*Race does not provide an accurate representation of human biological variation. It was never accurate in the past, and it remains inaccurate when referencing contemporary human populations. Humans are not divided biologically into distinct continental types or racial genetic clusters. Instead, the Western concept of race must be understood as a classification system that emerged from, and in support of, European colonialism, oppression, and discrimination. It thus does not have its roots in biological reality, but in policies of discrimination. Because of that, over the last five centuries, race has become a social reality that structures societies and how we experience the world. In this regard, race is real, as is racism, and both have real biological consequences.*

*Humans share the vast majority (99.9%) of our DNA in common. Individuals nevertheless exhibit substantial genetic and phenotypic variability. Genome/environment interactions, local and regional biological changes through time, and genetic exchange among populations have produced the biological diversity we see in humans today. Notably, variants are not distributed across our species in a manner that maps clearly onto socially-recognized racial groups. This is true even for aspects of human variation that we frequently emphasize in discussions of race, such as facial features, skin color and hair type. No group of people is, or ever has been, biologically homogeneous or "pure." Furthermore, human populations are not — and never have been — biologically discrete, truly isolated, or fixed.*

*While race does not accurately represent the patterns of human biological diversity, an abundance of scientific research demonstrates that racism, prejudice against someone because of their race and a belief in the inherent superiority and inferiority of different racial groups, affects our biology, health, and well-being. This means that race, while not a scientifically accurate biological concept, can have important biological consequences because of the effects of racism. The belief in races as a natural aspect of human biology and the institutional and structural inequities (racism) that have emerged in tandem with such beliefs in European colonial contexts are among the most damaging elements in human societies.*

*The Teaching Tolerance Report, "Race Does Not Equal DNA", provides more insight about race as it relates to human. The full report can be found at*

*<http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/Race%20does%20not%20equal%20DNA%20-%20TT50.pdf>*

### **Excerpt from Race Does Not Equal DNA**

*...The majority of Americans still operate on the assumption that there are legitimate biological races within the human species, and that these racial categories align with physical features—in other words, the way that race is socially defined in the United States. To debunk this misconception, it is important to understand two often-conflated definitions of race.*

**BIOLOGICAL RACE** *has been defined by combinations of physical features, geographic ancestry, frequencies of genes (alleles) and evolutionary lineages. Biological races exist within some species. This is why we know they do not exist within our species, modern humans.*

***SOCIALLY DEFINED RACE*** has been defined by an arbitrarily organized combination of physical traits, geographic ancestry, language, religion and a variety of other cultural features. Social definitions of race differ depending on context and always operate in the service of social-dominance hierarchies.



The modern consensus of evolutionary biologists is that our species does not have enough genetic variability among its populations to justify either the identification of geographically based races or of evolutionarily distinct lineages. This is because we are a relatively young species (150,000–200,000 years old) that has always maintained significant amounts of gene flow among its major population centers (or regional clusters of inhabitants). Indeed, all modern humans living today are descended from people who once lived in East Africa. (The oldest modern human fossils come from Omo Kibish in Ethiopia.) Humans did not begin to populate the rest of the world until about 60,000 years ago. Some of the first recorded civilizations were located in Ethiopia (prior to 3,000 B.C.E.) and then moved up the Blue Nile to modern-day Egypt.

Thus, many of the biological traits not found in sub-Saharan Africans are relatively new; fair skin and the blue-eye allele are—at most— 6,000 years old. Finally, this also means that when most people think of biological ancestry, they are really envisioning recent ancestry relative to our species' existence (within the last 50,000 years or so).

This is where our understanding often gets fouled up. How is it possible that geographically based genetic and physical variation can tell you something about an individual's recent biological ancestry, and yet that variation is not useful in identifying an individual's biological race? Isn't it true that Norwegians have fair complexions and Nigerians are dark?

It is true that all modern human populations have genetic differences that reflect adaptation to the environments their "recent" ancestors inhabited. There are also genetic changes that resulted from simple chance events. Have you ever heard the term "genetic drift"? This refers to chance events that alter gene frequencies in populations. This happened when human groups migrated out of Africa at different times and in different directions. Members of a given group carried a unique subset of all human genetic variation with them. For all these reasons, there is no single physical trait or gene that can be used to unambiguously assign people to racial groups. Here's an example: The sickle cell allele is found in high frequency wherever malaria is found, including West Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Mediterranean Basin and in India. It is not found among Kenyans whose ancestry is from high- altitude regions of that country. Therefore, the sickle cell gene can't be used to define races.

Another relevant example is skin color. Skin color variation is associated with solar intensity, and thus all populations with tropical ancestry have darker skin than those whose recent ancestry is from the temperate and arctic zones. Solomon Islanders, for example, have physical traits very similar to sub-Saharan Africans, yet these Pacific Islanders are much further apart on overall gene frequency (the percentage of genes of a given type) from sub-Saharan Africans than from Europeans.

A less visible evolutionary trait is the ability to tolerate milk beyond the age of weaning, which evolved both in Europeans and in some Africans (Masai tribe) due to the domestication of cattle.

*It stands to follow that if we attempt to infer relatedness between human groups based only on physical traits like dark skin and milk tolerance, we consistently incorrectly assign groups of people together.*

*Physical factors fail to correctly cluster humans and thus cannot be used to assign people to racial groups—a fact scientists have known since the 1940s! Yet today, most Americans still utilize physical features to judge the racial alignment of individuals...*

## What is Racial identity?

Racial identity is externally imposed: *“How do others perceive me?”*

Racial identity is also internally constructed: *“How do I identify myself?”*

Understanding how our identities and experiences have been shaped by race is vital. We are all awarded certain privileges and or disadvantages because of our race whether or not we are conscious of it.

*Race matters. Race matters ... because of persistent racial inequality in society - inequality that cannot be ignored.*

**JUSTICE SONYA SOTOMAYOR**, *United States Supreme Court*

## Developmental Models of Racial Identity

Many sociologists and psychologists have identified that there are similar patterns every individual goes through when recognizing their racial identity. While these patterns help us understand the link between race and identity, creating one's racial identity is a fluid and nonlinear process that varies for every person and group.

Think of these categories of [Racial Identity Development](#) as stations along a journey of the continual evolution of your racial identity. Your personal experiences, family, community, workplaces, the aging process, and political and social events – all play a role in understanding our own racial identity. During this process, people move between a desire to "fit in" to dominant norms, to a questioning of one's own identity and that of others. It includes feelings of confusion and often introspection, as well as moments of celebration of self and others. You may begin at any point on this chart and move in any direction – sometimes on the same day! Recognizing the station you are in helps you understand who you are.





# LET'S TALK ABOUT RACE

## Racial Identity Development

### MINORITY ETHNIC GROUP

#### Conformity

- Has a positive attitude toward and preference for dominant cultural values
- Places considerable value on characteristics that represent dominant cultural groups
- May devalue or hold negative views of own race or other racial/ethnic groups

#### Dissonance and Appreciating

- Begins to question identity
- Recognizes conflicting messages and observations that challenge beliefs/stereotypes of own cultural groups and value of mainstream cultural groups
- Develops a growing sense of one's own cultural heritage and the existence of racism
- Moves away from seeing dominant cultural groups as all good

#### Resistance and Immersion

- Embraces and holds a positive attitude toward and preference for his or her own race and cultural heritage
- Rejects dominant values of society and culture
- Focuses on eliminating oppression within own racial/cultural group
- Likely to possess considerable feelings - including distrust and anger - toward dominant cultural groups and anything that may represent them

#### Introspection

- Begins to question the psychological cost of projecting strong feelings toward dominant cultural groups
- Desires to refocus more energy on personal identity while respecting own cultural groups
- Realigns perspective to note that not all aspects of dominant cultural groups - one's own racial/cultural group or other diverse groups - are good or bad
- May struggle with and experience conflicts of loyalty as perspective broadens

#### Integrative Awareness

- Has developed a secure, confident sense of racial/cultural identity
- Becomes multicultural
- Maintains pride in racial identity and cultural heritage
- Commits to supporting and appreciating all oppressed and diverse groups

### MAJORITY ETHNIC GROUP

#### Conformity

- Has minimal awareness of self as a racial person
- Believes strongly in the universality of values and norms
- Perceives white American cultural groups as more highly developed
- May justify disparity of treatment
- May be unaware of beliefs that reflect this

#### Dissonance

- Experiences an opportunity to examine own prejudices and biases
- Moves toward the realization that dominant society oppresses racially and culturally diverse groups
- May feel shame, anger, and depression about the perpetuation of racism by white American cultural groups
- May begin to question previously held beliefs or reformatify prior views

#### Resistance and Immersion

- Increases awareness of one's own racism and how racism is projected in society (e.g., media and language)
- Likely feels angry about messages concerning other racial and cultural
- May counteract feelings by assuming a paternalistic role (knowing what is best for clients without their involvement) or overidentifying with another racial/cultural group

#### Introspection

- Begins to redefine what it means to be a white American and to be a racial and cultural being
- Recognizes the inability to fully understand the experience of others from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds
- May feel disconnected from the white American group

#### Integrative Awareness

- Appreciates racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity
- Is aware of and understands self as a racial and cultural being
- Is aware of sociopolitical influences of racism
- Internalizes a nonracist identity

**Model Source:** Sue DW. Multidimensional facets of cultural competence. *The Counseling Psychologist*. 2001;29(6):790-821 and Sue DW, Sue D. *Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory and Practice*. 3rd ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons; 1999. Racial/cultural identity development models; pp. 235-242.

## No One is Colorblind to Race

The concept of race is intimately connected to our lives and has serious implications. It operates in real and definitive ways that confer benefits and privileges to some and withholds them from others. Ignoring race means ignoring the establishment of racial hierarchies in society and the injustices these hierarchies have created and continue to reinforce.

Excerpt from: "[Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race](#)," by Erin N. Winkler, Ph.D.



### ...What do children learn, and when?

*In a study that followed approximately 200 black and white children from the ages of six months to six years, Katz and Kofkin (1997) found that infants are able to nonverbally categorize people by race and gender at six months of age. The infants looked significantly longer at an unfamiliar face of a different race than they did at an unfamiliar face of their same race. The researchers argue that, because this finding is very consistent in six-month-olds, "initial awareness [of race] probably begins even earlier" (Katz & Kofkin, 1997, p. 55).*

*Toddlers as young as two years use racial categories to reason about people's behaviors (Hirschfeld, 2008), and numerous studies show that three- to five-year-olds not only categorize people by race, but express bias based on race (Aboud, 2008; Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz, 2003; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). In a yearlong study, Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) found that three- to five-year-olds in a racially and ethnically diverse day care center used racial categories to identify themselves and others, to include or exclude children from activities, and to negotiate.*

### How and why does this happen?

*Research has disproved the popular belief that children only have racial biases if they are directly taught to do so. Numerous studies have shown that children's racial beliefs are not significantly or reliably related to those of their parents (Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz, 2003; Patterson & Bigler, 2006).*

*While this may seem counterintuitive, Hirschfeld (2008) says it should not surprise us. Children, he argues, are motivated to learn and conform to the broader cultural and social norms that will help them function in society. In order to gauge these "community norms," children have to gather information from a broad range of sources – not just their own families. He gives the example of accents as a way of illustrating his point. If children looked only or even mostly to their parents to learn behaviors and norms, then we would expect children of nonnative speakers to acquire their parents' accents. Instead, children acquire the formative accent of the region where they are growing up (Hirschfeld, 2008).*

*So, children collect information from the world around them in order to actively construct their own beliefs (Patterson & Bigler, 2006). But why do children form racial biases so early in life, even if no one around them is teaching them to do so? And why is race a social category to which they attach meaning? Why not height or hairstyle or lefthandedness? Scholars argue that*

*there are both internal (biological and cognitive) and external (environmental and societal) factors at play. First, the immature cognitive structures of preschoolers make them rife for stereotyping (Aboud, 2008; Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz & Kofkin, 1997). While young children are able to categorize people by race, they are often not able to categorize a person according to multiple dimensions at once (Aboud, 2008). Thus, they engage in “transductive reasoning” – when they see people who are alike in one dimension (e.g., skin color), they presume they are alike in other dimensions as well (e.g., abilities or intelligence) (Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Patterson & Bigler, 2006).*

*Second, factors in children’s environments, and in our society as a whole, teach children that race is a social category of significance. Bigler and her colleagues found that environments teach young children which categories seem to be most important (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Children then attach meaning to those social categories on their own, without adult instruction. Patterson and Bigler (2006) argue that even a seemingly innocuous statement like, “Good morning, boys and girls,” helps children infer that gender is an important social category, and children can then attach their own meanings to gender categories (e.g., “Girls are smarter.”), or infer them from their environment (e.g., “Only men can be President of the United States.”), even if adults do not mention or endorse those ideas...*

*Although children often attach meaning to race without adults directly telling them to do so, it is important to note that “the biases children exhibit are not random” (Katz & Kofkin, 1997, p. 62). In fact, they often “reflect both subtle and not so subtle messages about the relative desirability of belonging to one social group as opposed to another” (Katz & Kofkin, 1997, p. 62). In other words, children pick up on the ways in which whiteness is normalized and privileged in U.S. society. What does this mean? Consciously or unconsciously, middle-class white culture is presented as a norm or a standard in the United States in terms of appearance, beauty, language, cultural practices, food, and so on (Johnson, 2006; McIntosh, 1990; Tatum, 1997). Tatum (1997) argues that this message is so prevalent in our society it is like “smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in” (p. 6). For very young children, this “smog” comes in the form of picture books, children’s movies, television, and children’s songs, which all include subtle messages that whiteness is preferable (Giroux, 2001; Graves, 1999; Katz, 2003; McIntosh, 1990; Murray & Mandara, 2002; Tatum, 1997). Even the language and symbolism we use daily tends to associate positive things with white (e.g., “purity,” “clean,” “Snow White,” “the good witch”) and negative things with black (e.g., “evil,” “sin,” “dirty,” “the wicked witch”), and studies have shown that children do generalize these linguistic connotations to people (Katz, 2003; Tatum, 1997)...*

### **What should caregivers do?**

*...Although race and racism are difficult topics, it is important to educate ourselves and discuss them with children in an age-appropriate way...*

The article, “When You Say You Don’t See Race, You’re Ignoring Racism, Not Helping to Solve It,” by Zach Stafford covers more about the dangers of ignoring race. For the full article, go to:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/26/do-not-see-race-ignoring-racism-not-helping> . Here is an excerpt:

... [The Colorblind] ideology is very popular – like a racial utopic version of the Golden Rule – but it's actually quite racist. "Colorblindness" doesn't acknowledge the very real ways in which racism has existed and continues to exist, both in individuals and systemically. By professing not to see race, you're just ignoring racism, not solving it.

Still, the idea of "colorblindness" is incredibly popular, especially with young people who believe racism is a problem for the older generation and will soon die out. According to a 2014 study done in partnership with MTV and David Binder Research, almost three-fourths of millennials believe that we should not see the color of someone's skin, as though it's a choice. Nearly 70% believe they have achieved this and are now actually colorblind; and the same percentage shockingly believe that we make society better by not seeing race or ethnicity.

But that ideology does present a very interesting question: If you were truly unable to see people's skin color, could you still be racist? Dr Osagie Obasogie, a professor at the University of California's Hasting College of Law and the author of Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race Through the Eyes of the Blind, wondered the same thing after seeing the biopic "Ray," about legendary blind musician Ray Charles. While watching the film, he found that Ray Charles seemed acutely aware of race, despite not having sight. He left the theater thinking about blindness and racism, and then spent the next eight years exploring it in his research.

What he found is that even people who have never had sight still use visual representations of people – including a person's perceived racial or ethnic identity – as a major marker for how they interact with them.

In Obasogie's interviews, he found that blind people use non-visual cues to determine race when meeting a new person. They combine evidence from their other senses – hair texture, accent and other markers (with varying degrees of reliability) – to create an understanding of someone's racial identity. And once a blind person figured out a new acquaintance's race, they would treat that person accordingly.

In one interview, Obasogie told me, a woman told a story from her childhood in which she walked in on her mother aggressively cleaning the kitchen. When she asked why, her mother responded that her black babysitter had been in the kitchen and black people had a smell, which she needed to wash away. The next day, the woman remembers going to smell her babysitter, finding she did have a smell and from then on always associated that smell with black people, despite never having noticed it before.

Racism – both the personal kind and the systemic kind– isn't necessarily triggered by the visual cue of another person's skin color. Racism is about the social value we assign to people and their actions based on their physical attributes, and neither blind nor colorblind people avoid that acculturation just because they lack the visual cues.

### Reflection:

- What are some experiences or identities that are central to who you are? How do you feel when they are ignored or "not seen"?
- The author in this article points out how people often use nonvisual cues to determine race. What does this reveal to us about the validity of pretending not to see race?



*Either America will destroy ignorance, or ignorance will destroy the United States.*

W.E.B. DUBOIS

## **RACISM = Racial Prejudice (Unfounded Beliefs + Irrational Fear) + Institutional Power**

Racism, like smog, swirls around us and permeates American society. It can be intentional, clear and direct or it can be expressed in more subtle ways that the perpetrator might not even be aware of.

Racism is a system of advantage based on race that involves systems and institutions, not just individual mindsets and actions. The critical variable in racism is the impact (outcomes) not the intent and operates at multiple levels including individual racism, interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and structural racism.

- **Individual racism** refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of individuals that support or perpetuate racism in conscious and unconscious ways. The U.S. cultural narrative about racism typically focuses on individual racism and fails to recognize systemic racism.

*Examples include believing in the superiority of white people, not hiring a person of color because “something doesn’t feel right,” or telling a racist joke.*

- **Interpersonal racism** occurs between individuals and includes public expressions of racism, often involving slurs, biases, hateful words or actions, or exclusion.
- **Institutional racism** occurs in organizations These are race-based policies and practices that give unfair advantages to whites over people of color. These institutional policies often never mention any racial group, but the intent is to create advantages.

*Example: A school system where students of color are more frequently distributed into the most crowded classrooms and underfunded schools and out of the highest-resourced schools.*

- **Structural racism** is the overarching system of racial bias across institutions and society. These systems give privileges to white people resulting in disadvantages to people of color.

*Example: Stereotypes of people of color as criminals in mainstream movies and media.*

Source: Adapted from Terry Keleher, [Applied Research Center, and Racial Equity Tools by OneTILT\(link is external\)](#)

## Breaking the Silence

Silence on issues of race hurts everyone. Reluctance to directly address the impact of race can result in a lack of connection between people, a loss of our society's potential and progress, and an escalation of fear and violence. Silence around other issues of identity can also have the same negative impact on society. Silence on race keeps us all from understanding and learning. We can break the silence by being proactive - by learning, reflecting and having courageous conversations with ourselves and others.

**Watch Video:** watch below as Franchesca Ramsey discusses racism on MTV's Decoded (*warning: adult language*): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eTWZ80z9EE> (watch first 5 min 20 sec)

## Take a moment to reflect



### Let's Think

How are you thinking about your own racialized identity after learning more about race?



### Let's Talk

Ask a friend who has a different racial identity than yours to discuss how cultivating a positive sense of racial identity about yourself and others can interrupt racism at every level (personally, socially, and institutionally)?



### Let's Act

#### For concerned citizens:

- Try this exercise on Choice Points to recognize the everyday opportunities you may have that can promote racial equity:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VB1xXwwJ\\_vWk1kblQafWcbwBCArzUIK5fYoVnvQNX98/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VB1xXwwJ_vWk1kblQafWcbwBCArzUIK5fYoVnvQNX98/edit)

- Activity: Try this group activity for talking about race effectively  
[https://www.livingroomconversations.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/race\\_and\\_ethnicity\\_3.pdf](https://www.livingroomconversations.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/race_and_ethnicity_3.pdf)

#### For Families and Educators:

Here are some ways to address race and racism in your classroom:

- Teaching young children about race: a guide for families and teachers:  
<https://www.teachingforchange.org/teaching-about-race>
- Talking to children about race:  
<http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/TT%20Difficult%20Conversations%20web.pdf>