

# RACE

the power of an illusion



What is this thing called race?

*The power of an illusion*

**itvs** community connections project



# Table of contents

## TABLE OF CONTENTS



<b>03</b>	Letter from the Executive Producer
<b>03</b>	Using This Guide
<b>04</b>	Ten Things Everyone Should Know about Race
<b>05</b>	Program Descriptions
<b>05</b>	Facilitation Tips
<b>06</b>	Suggestions for Viewing
<b>07</b>	Discussion Starters: Episode I
<b>09</b>	Discussion Starters: Episode II
<b>11</b>	Discussion Starters: Episode III
<b>14</b>	Resources and Acknowledgments



# Letter from the executive producer

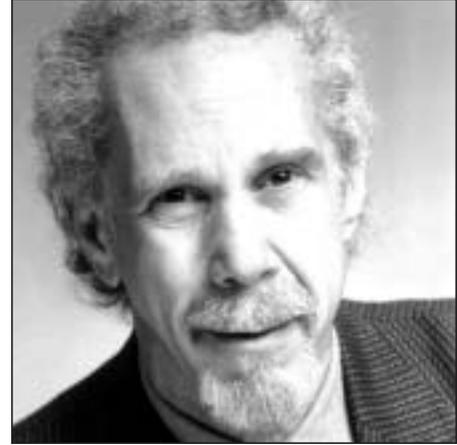
Dear Viewer,

Race is one topic where we all think we're experts. Yet ask 10 people to define race or name "the races," and you're likely to get 10 different answers. Few issues are characterized by more contradictory assumptions and myths, each voiced with absolute certainty.

In producing this series, we felt it was important to go back to first principles and ask, What is this thing called "race"? - a question so basic it is rarely raised. What we discovered is that most of our common assumptions about race - for instance, that the world's people can be divided biologically along racial lines - are wrong. Yet the consequences of racism are very real.

How do we make sense of these two seeming contradictions? Our hope is that this series can help us all navigate through our myths and misconceptions, and scrutinize some of the assumptions we take for granted. In that sense, the real subject of the film is not so much race but the viewer, or more precisely, the notions about race we all hold.

We hope this series can help clear away the biological underbrush and leave starkly visible the underlying social, economic, and political conditions that disproportionately channel advantages and opportunities to white people. Perhaps then we can shift the conversation from discussing diversity and respecting cultural difference to building a more just and equitable society.



— Larry Adelman  
Executive Producer

## using this guide

### Using This Guide

To help people get the most from their viewing experience, we strongly recommend engaging audiences in the "Before Viewing" questions for each episode. Then take a look at the wide range of questions in the remainder of the guide and choose the ones that best meet the needs and interests of your group.

**For each episode, you'll find six kinds of discussion starters and resources:**

- > **Before Viewing Questions:** These prompts are designed to help people become more conscious of the ideas they hold as they enter this discussion. Asking people to reflect upon what they think prior to viewing can sharpen their focus as they consider issues raised in the films.
- > **Comprehension Questions:** RACE—The Power of an Illusion presents a lot of complex information that may be new to viewers. These questions can help make sure that everyone understands the core content of the program.
- > **Discussion Questions:** These are open-ended questions designed to help participants deepen their understanding.
- > **Activity Suggestion:** The ideas in this section can be tried after viewing as a way to delve more deeply into key concepts, or as before & after exercises to help make people aware of their beliefs and how those beliefs are challenged by the film(s).
- > **Web Site Tips:** This section highlights activities on the companion Web site ([www.pbs.org/race](http://www.pbs.org/race)) to help you further explore the themes of each episode.
- > **Key References:** For more advanced groups, we include this list of key historical documents, court cases, and laws cited in each episode.

# Ten Things everyone should know about race

## Ten Things Everyone Should Know about Race



There's less—and  
more—to race  
than meets  
the eye.

- 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.

## Program Descriptions

**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.

## Facilitation Tips

**RACE—The Power of an Illusion** can challenge long and deeply held assumptions. People react to such challenges differently. Some will be inspired. Others may be disturbed. Either way, the power of the film can infuse discussions with emotion.

### You can best help people engage in open and deep inquiry if you:

- > View the film beforehand so you are not processing your own reactions at the same time that you are trying to facilitate a discussion.
- > Know who is present and let their interests guide the discussion topics.
- > Establish ground rules so that everyone knows they will be heard and no one can dominate the discussion or silence others.
- > Encourage active listening.
- > Invite people to participate.



## *suggestions for viewing* **Suggestions For Viewing**

You can significantly increase the impact of your discussion by asking people to assess their ideas about race prior to viewing the film. Here are some ways you can evoke people's beliefs and get them to reflect on their experience and preconceptions:

- > Photocopy the “Ten Things Everyone Should Know about Race” in this guide and ask people to review and comment.
- > Discuss the “Before Viewing” questions tied to the episode you're watching (see the “Discussion Starters” in the following pages). Ask people to make note of their answers. After viewing, return to those questions to see if answers were changed or challenged by anything in the films.



## *general questions* **General Questions**

**After viewing, you might want to get the discussion started with a general question. Here are some possibilities:**

- > Reconsider your answers to the “Before Viewing” questions. Did the film change or challenge any of your assumptions? Did anything in the film(s) surprise you? Why?
- > Two weeks from now, what will you most remember from the film(s) and why?
- > How is this film different from or similar to other films you’ve seen about race?
- > Review the “Ten Things Everyone Should Know about Race” handout. Do you understand each of the items? Which things in the list challenge your responses to the pre-viewing questions?

# episode 1 — The Difference Between Us

## Discussion Starters

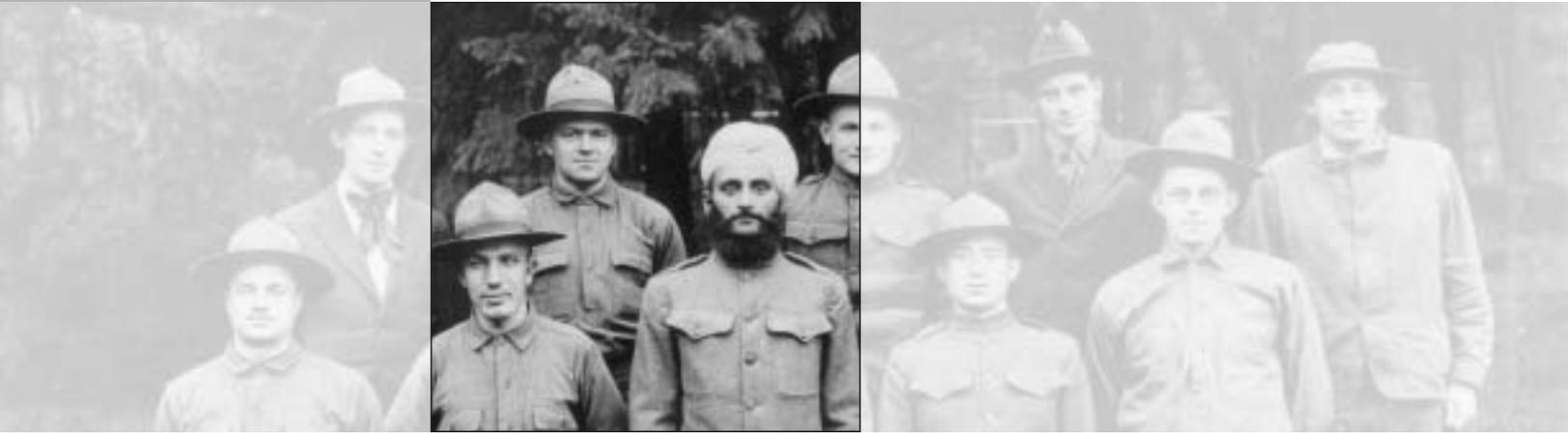
### Episode I—The Difference Between Us

**“Race is not based on biology, but race is rather an idea that we ascribe to biology.”**

— Alan Goodman,  
*biological anthropologist*

#### Before Viewing

- > How would you define race? What does it mean to you?
- > How many races do you think there are? What are they? How do you decide which race someone belongs to?
- > Look around the room or around your community. Who do you think is likely to be most similar to you, biologically or genetically? Why?
- > Where do your ideas about race come from? What are the sources of your information?



#### Comprehension Questions

- > What is the difference between a biological and a social view of race?
- > Excluding your immediate family members, are you more likely to be genetically like someone who looks like you or someone who does not?
- > 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."
- > 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?
- > 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?

#### Discussion Questions

At the beginning of the film, the students are asked to predict whom they will be most like when they compare their DNA samples. How did the results compare with your expectations? Did you share the students' surprise? If so, why?

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?

# episode 1 - The Difference Between us

## Discussion Questions continued

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?

Towards the end of this episode, the students are asked if they would trade their skin color. 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?

For many people, race is an important part of their identity. How do the following two comments from the film affect the way you think of yourself:

- > "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

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?

### Try This Activity

Use the following list of inherited, biological traits to divide people into groups (i.e., first group people by hair color, then regroup by blood type, etc.):

- Hair color
- Blood types (A, B, O, A/B)
- Whether or not your tongue curls
- Lactose tolerance or intolerance (ability to digest milk products)
- Left-handedness or right-handedness
- Fingerprint types (loop, whorl, arch or tented arch)
- Skin color (compare the inside of your arm)

Does the composition of the groups remain consistent from one criterion to the next? If the groups change depending on the criteria, what does that tell us about "group racial characteristics"? What are some reasons why we might classify using some traits, but not others?

### Key References

- 1896 - Frederick Hoffman, *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*
- 1972 - Richard Lewontin, "The Apportionment of Human Diversity," *Evolutionary Biology*, Vol. 6, 381-398.

### Web Site Tip:

**Prior to viewing, visit the companion Web site at [www.pbs.org/race](http://www.pbs.org/race) and take the "Genetic Diversity Quiz" in the Human Diversity section. As you watch, see if any of your answers change. To follow up on the suggested activities, try the site's Sorting People activity. See if you can match people with their backgrounds just by looking at them.**

## Discussion Starters

### Episode II—The Story We Tell

# episode 2 — the story we tell

**“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*

#### Before Viewing

- > How long do you think the idea of race has been around? Where did it come from?
- > Do you think Africans were enslaved in the Americas because they were deemed inferior, or were they deemed inferior because they were enslaved?

#### Comprehension Questions

- > 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?
- > What is the connection of American slavery to prejudices against African-descended peoples? Why does race persist after abolition?
- > 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?
- > 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?
- > 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?
- > What role did beliefs about race play in the American colonization of Mexican territory, Cuba, the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico?

#### Discussion Questions

What is the significance of the episode’s title, “The Story We Tell”? What function has that story played in the U.S.? 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?

Organizers of the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair put on display people whom they defined as “other.” Although few would do this today, many still see others as distinctly different from themselves. In your community, who is seen as “different”? What characterizes those who are defined as different?

In the film, historian 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?



## episode 2 - the story we tell

### Discussion Questions continued

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?

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?

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?

#### Try This Activity

Prior to viewing, define what it means to be "civilized." Make a list of what characteristics a civilized person possesses. After viewing, re-examine your list. How does your list compare to 18th & 19th century policies on American Indians, slaves, colonizing the Philippines, annexing Mexican land, etc.? How do beliefs about race influence beliefs about what it means to be civilized?

#### Key References

1776 - Johann Blumenbach, *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*

1871 - Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*

1839 - Samuel Morton, *Crania Americana*

1854 - Josiah C. Nott, *Types of Mankind*

1830 - Indian Removal Act forcibly relocates thousands of Indians from the southeastern United States to west of the Mississippi River.

1857 - Supreme Court rules in *Dred Scott* that African Americans are ineligible for citizenship

1899 - Treaty of Paris - Spain cedes Guam, Puerto Rico & Philippine Islands to the U.S.

#### Web Site Tip:

Visit the Race Timeline section of the companion Web site ([www.pbs.org/race](http://www.pbs.org/race)) to explore key moments in the history and evolution of the race concept. See how ideas and definitions of race have changed over time, and how different groups were affected by these changes.

## Discussion Starters

### Episode III—The House We Live In

*episode 3 - The house we live in*

#### Before Viewing

- > 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?
- > What stereotypes have you heard or seen about different racial groups? Where do they come from?
- > Do you think people today should be held accountable for past discrimination? Why or why not?
- > 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?

#### Comprehensive Questions

- > 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?
- > How did European “ethnics” become white? What changes made this possible?
- > How did federal housing policies institutionalize segregation and wealth disparities?
- > Why do property values go down when a neighborhood changes from white to nonwhite? Who plays a role in this?
- > What happens to measures of racial disparities in places like education and welfare rates when groups of similar income AND wealth are compared?

#### Discussion Questions

The film shows how 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?

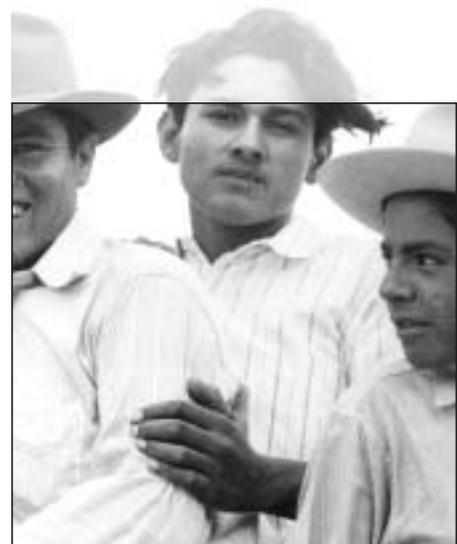
In the early part of this century, Asian immigrants were not eligible for citizenship, no matter how long they lived in the U.S. What is the legacy of those laws in terms of how Asian Americans are viewed today? What role does race play in current U.S. policy on immigration and granting of citizenship? How is our idea of citizenship still tied to race?

Commenting on the idea that the U.S. is a melting pot, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva says, “That melting pot never included people of color. Blacks, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, etc. could not melt into the pot.” 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?

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?

**“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



# episode 3 - The house we live in

## Discussion Questions continued

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?

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?

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?

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?

How would you respond to Beverly Daniel Tatum's closing questions in the film:

- > What can I influence?
- > How am I making this a more equitable environment?
- > Who is included in this picture and who isn't; who has had opportunities in my environment and who hasn't?
- > What can I do about that?

### Try This Activity

Ask each person to read through this list and give themselves a point for each item that is true for them:

- 1 My parents and grandparents were able to purchase or rent housing in any neighborhood they could afford.
- 2 I can take a job with an employer who believes in affirmative action without having co-workers suspect that I got it because of my race.
- 3 I grew up in a house that was owned by my parents.
- 4 I can look in mainstream media and see people who look like me represented fairly and in a wide range of roles.
- 5 I live in a safe neighborhood with good schools.
- 6 I can go shopping most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- 7 If my car breaks down on a deserted stretch of road, I can trust that the law enforcement officer who shows up will be helpful.
- 8 I don't have to worry about helping my parents out when they retire.
- 9 I never think twice about calling the police when trouble occurs.
- 10 Schools in my community teach about my race and heritage and present it in positive ways.
- 11 I can be pretty sure that if I go into a business and ask to speak to the "person in charge" that I will be facing a person of my race.



# episode 3 - The house we live in

## Discussion Questions continued

For additional examples of advantage, ask the group to brainstorm from their own experience or from the film. The list above is based partly on "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy Macintosh, available in many places online.

After reviewing the list, ask people to notice who ends up with the most and fewest points. Do patterns emerge? Would people's answers have been different if they were a different race?

Conclude this activity by discussing legal scholar John A. Powell's observation that in a racist system, privilege is often conveyed, not earned: "Most of the benefits can be obtained without ever doing anything personally. For whites, they are getting the spoils of a racist system, even if they are not personally racist." Talk about the difference between personal racism, where the beliefs and/or actions of an individual reflect prejudice or result in discrimination, and institutional racism, where people benefit or are disadvantaged without necessarily doing anything themselves. How might people address the institutional racism they identify during the activity?

### Key References

1909 - U.S. Court of Appeals in Massachusetts case *In Re Halladjian* declares Armenians legally white

1913 - first alien land law passed in California

1922 - Supreme Court case of *Ozawa v. United States* declares Japanese ineligible for citizenship

1923 - Supreme Court case of *United States v. Thind* declares Asian Indians ineligible for citizenship

1924 - Johnson-Reed Immigration Act establishes immigration quotas based on national origin

1930-1940s - federal housing programs created, making home ownership possible for millions of white Americans for the first time

1954 - McCarran-Walter Act removes racial barriers from naturalization

1968 - Fair Housing Act passes, making housing discrimination illegal

### Web Site Tip:

To learn more about housing and wealth, visit the **Where Race Lives** section of the companion Web site ([www.pbs.org/race](http://www.pbs.org/race)). You might also view the slide shows examining people's different perspectives on race in the **Me, My Race, and I** section.

## resources

### Resources

The companion Web site for RACE—The Power of an Illusion ([www.pbs.org/race](http://www.pbs.org/race)) includes a wealth of interactive exercises and in-depth resources, including background articles, lesson plans, and links to related organizations.

### Acknowledgments

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Developed by Dr. Faith Rogow, Insighters Educational Consulting, with contributions from Jean Cheng, Larry Adelman, Jim Sommers, and Timothea Howard.

Reviewers: Linda Li, Moses Howard, Marian Urquilla, and Amy Quinn.

Design: Brad Bunkers

Photos: Library of Congress, American Museum of Natural History, UCLA/Visual Communications, Howard University, Oregon Historical Society, Truman State University, New York Public Library, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, Southern California Library for Social Studies Research, Cardona-Bagai Family Library

RACE—The Power of an Illusion was produced by California Newsreel in association with the Independent Television Service (ITVS). ITVS was created by Congress to “increase the diversity of programs available to public television, and to serve underserved audiences, in particular minorities and children.” For downloadable educational and outreach resources from ITVS’s Community Connections Project, visit [www.itvs.org/outreach/toolkits.htm](http://www.itvs.org/outreach/toolkits.htm).

Major funding for this program was provided by Ford Foundation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Diversity Fund. Additional funding by Annie E. Casey Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Akonadi Foundation, Lida and Alejandro Zaffaroni, the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, and Nu Lambda Trust.

For more information about ITVS or to obtain additional copies of this guide, contact us at 415-356-8383; fax 415-356-8391 or visit the Web site: [www.itvs.org/outreach/toolkits.htm](http://www.itvs.org/outreach/toolkits.htm).

To purchase the video, call 1-877-811-7495 or go to [www.newsreel.org/films/race.htm](http://www.newsreel.org/films/race.htm).

Visit the companion Web site at [www.pbs.org/race](http://www.pbs.org/race).



FORD FOUNDATION

