



# AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## *Advancing Knowledge, Solving Human Problems*

### **An Introductory Guide to Teaching about Race after Charlottesville**

This tool is meant to serve as a resource for teachers who may not usually include a discussion of race in their curriculum to begin a conversation with their students about the misperceptions and the realities of race.

#### **Main objectives:**

1. Introduce students to the biological myth of race and the facts about human variation.
2. Explain the historical construction of race in the United States.
3. Discuss how the historical framing of race has led to the creation and persistence of racism.

#### Recommended resources:

- "[How Real Is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology](#)," Second Edition  
Carol C. Mukhopadhyay, Rosemary Henze, and Yolanda T. Moses  
[Online Supplement](#)
- "[Essentials of Cultural Anthropology: A Toolkit for a Global Age](#)" Chapter 6: Race and Racism  
Kenneth J. Guest
- [Race: Are we so Different?](#) A project of the American Anthropological Association

#### **The Biological Myth of Race and the Truth about Human Variation**

##### Key points:

- Current science tells us we share a common ancestry and the differences among people are not as great as they seem.
- Human variation exists on a spectrum that can't be easily divided into races; we are more alike than we are different.
- "Race" is not a scientific, biological fact. This understanding doesn't mean race isn't real. Politically and culturally, race is very real.

##### Activities, readings, and resources:

- Why do some people have light skin and others have dark skin? How do scientists explain the broad spectrum of human skin color around the globe? Learn more in the "[Only Skin Deep](#)" [module](#) on the *Race: Are We So Different?* website.
- See "How Real Is Race?" [Chapter 1: The Fallacy of Race as Biology](#)

#### **The Construction of Race in the US**

##### Key points:

- Today scholars in many fields argue that "race" as it is understood in the United States of America 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 in to provide slave labor.

- As they were constructing US society, leaders among European-Americans fabricated the cultural/behavioral characteristics associated with each "race," linking superior traits with Europeans and negative and inferior ones to blacks and Indians. Numerous arbitrary and fictitious beliefs about the different peoples were institutionalized and deeply embedded in American thought.
- We now understand that human cultural behavior is learned, conditioned into infants beginning at birth, and always subject to modification. No human is born with a built-in culture or language. Our temperaments, dispositions, and personalities, regardless of genetic propensities, are developed within sets of meanings and values that we call "culture." Studies of infant and early childhood learning and behavior attest to the reality of our cultures in forming who we are.

Activities, readings, and resources:

- There is a complete list of articles about the historical construction of race available on the *Race: Are We So Different?* [website](#).
- The [full AAA statement on race](#) provides additional detail about the key points listed above and below.
- See "How Real Is Race?" [Chapter 2: Culture Creates Race](#)

### **The Creation and Persistence of Racism**

Key points:

- "Race" evolved as a worldview, a body of prejudgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior. Racial beliefs constitute myths about the diversity in the human species and about the abilities and behavior of people homogenized into "racial" categories. The myths fused behavior and physical features together in the public mind, impeding our comprehension of both biological variations and cultural behavior, implying that both are genetically determined. Racial myths bear no relationship to the reality of human capabilities or behavior.
- Present-day inequalities between so-called "racial" groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances.
- Racism: Individual thoughts and actions and institutional patterns and policies that create unequal access to power, resources, and opportunities based on imagined differences among groups. (Definition from "Cultural Anthropology: A Toolkit for a Global Age" (2013) Kenneth J. Guest Chapter 6: Race and Racism). Groups that benefit from these institutional patterns (white

people in the United States, for example) can experience prejudice based on their skin color, but cannot be the victims of racism.

Discussion prompts:

- Given the extent to which racism has become deeply ingrained into the subconscious of our society, what are some possible avenues available to begin breaking down racial myths?
- How are inequalities present in our day-to-day lives in ways that may not always be visible to those who aren't disadvantaged by them? How might we as a society work against these existing structures?

Activities, readings, and resources:

- [The Charlottesville Syllabus](#) is a resource created by the Graduate Student Coalition for Liberation to be used to educate readers about the long history of white supremacy in Charlottesville, Virginia.
- See "How Real Is Race?" [Chapter 3: Race and Hot Button Issues in Educational Settings](#)

**The following resources may also be helpful when considering how to talk to students about race:**

["Race: Are We So Different?"](#)

Alan H. Goodman, Yolanda T. Moses, and Joseph L. Jones

Featuring new and engaging essays by noted anthropologists and illustrated with full color photos, RACE: Are We So Different? is an accessible and fascinating look at the idea of race, demonstrating how current scientific understanding is often inconsistent with popular notions of race. Taken from the popular national public education project and museum exhibition, it explores the contemporary experience of race and racism in the United States and the often-invisible ways race and racism have influenced laws, customs, and social institutions.

["Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real About Race in School"](#)

Edited by Mica Pollock

Which acts by educators are "racist" and which are "antiracist"? How can an educator constructively discuss complex issues of race with students and colleagues? In Everyday Antiracism leading educators deal with the most challenging questions about race in school, offering invaluable and effective advice.

For syllabi that engage with the topic of race more broadly, visit the AAA's [Teaching Materials Exchange](#) and search under the topic "race." You can also access additional information about race and racism on the American Anthropological Association website at [www.americananthro.org/understandingrace](http://www.americananthro.org/understandingrace).