

Ten Things everyone should know

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.

Race: The Power of an Illusion

Episode 1: The Difference Between Us

“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.

Discussion Questions

- How would you define race? What does it mean to you?
- Where do your ideas about race come from? What are your sources of information?
- In what ways did the film change or challenge any of your assumptions about race?
- Did anything in the film surprise you? Why?
- 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?
- Did the film present anything that shifted your thinking about race? If so, what? Is it difficult to make this shift? Why?
- Would you trade in your skin color if given the choice? Why/why not? How do you think your life would be different if you looked like someone of a different race?