

# RACE

## the power of an illusion

### TEN THINGS EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RACE

Our eyes tell us that people look different. No one has trouble distinguishing a Czech from a Chinese. But what do those differences mean? Are they biological? Has race always been with us? How does race affect people today?

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 distinctions, but according to religion, status, gender, class, even language. The English language didn't even have the word 'race' until it turns up in 1508 in a poem by William Dunbar referring to a line of kings.
2. **Race has no genetic basis.** Not one characteristic, trait or even one 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 or isolated enough to evolve into separate subspecies or races. Despite surface appearances, we are among the most similar of all species.
4. **Skin color really is only skin deep.** Most traits are inherited independently from one from another. The genes influencing skin color have nothing to do with the genes influencing hair form, height, blood type, musical talent, athletic ability or forms of intelligence. Knowing one trait, like skin color, doesn't necessarily tell you anything else about that person.
5. **Most variation is within, not between, "races."** Of the small amount of total human genetic variation, 85% exists within any local population, be they Italians, Kurds, Koreans or Cherokees. About 94% can be found within any continent. That means 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 war, even debt, but not because of physical characteristics or a belief in natural inferiority. Due to a unique set of historical circumstances, ours was the

first slave system where all the slaves shared similar physical characteristics.

7. **Race and freedom evolved together.** The U.S. was founded on the radical new principle that “All men are created equal.” But our early economy was based largely on slavery. How could this anomaly be rationalized? 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.** As the race idea evolved, white superiority became “common sense” in white America. It rationalized not only slavery but also the extermination of Indians, exclusion of Asian immigrants, and the taking of Mexican lands by a nation that otherwise professed a deep belief in liberty and equality. Racial practices became institutionalized 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. Our government and social institutions disproportionately, albeit often invisibly, channel wealth, power, and resources to the “unmarked” race - white people. This affects everyone, whether we are aware of it or not.
10. **Colorblindness will not end racism.** Pretending race doesn’t exist is not the same as creating equality. Race is more than stereotypes and individual prejudice. To combat racism, we need to identify and remedy social policies and institutional practices that advantage some groups at the expense of others.

***RACE – The Power of an Illusion*** is California Newsreel’s acclaimed three-part series broadcast by PBS that challenges one of our most fundamental beliefs: that human beings come bundled into a few distinct groups. But just because race isn’t biological, doesn’t mean it isn’t real. The series also scrutinizes where the idea of race came from, how it took such a hold over our minds, and why race still matters.

For DVDs, digital files and background information: [www.newsreel.org](http://www.newsreel.org).

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

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