

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



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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.



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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). You might also view the slide shows examining people's different perspectives on race in the **Me, My Race, and I** section.