

RACE Are We So Different? **A New Public Education Program**

by Mary Margaret Overbey



After more than six years of planning, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) has created a highly acclaimed public education program on race and human variation to promote broad understanding of race and human variation, to explain what race is and is not, and to produce tools to teach about race. The program, *RACE Are We So Different?*, was made possible with nearly four million dollars in funding from the Ford Foundation and National Science Foundation. The *RACE* exhibit opened at the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul in January 2007 with outstanding reviews from visitors and the media and began a national tour in May 2007. Twelve other cities across the U.S., including Washington, D.C., will host the exhibit through mid-2011. At this time, more than 18 cities are on a waiting list to host the exhibit.

Race remains an unspoken, yet powerful and not well understood, facet of life in the United States. More than 40 years after the civil rights movement and with long-standing remedies and mechanisms in place to counter and track discrimination and social injustice, we like to think that America has moved beyond race. But have we?

Educators know more than most that race continues to underlie relationships among students, teachers, and administrators and daily life in schools and communities across the U.S. Increasingly diverse student populations require schools to ensure that administrators, teachers, and students understand and appreciate diversity. Multicultural activities celebrate the foods, dress, and languages that reflect the many cultures represented among students, faculty, and administrators in schools.

Focusing on differences, however, make it difficult to see and celebrate the similarities among people. And it does little to explain and disentangle notions of race from the concept of culture, adding to the confusion about what race is and isn't.

Project Goal & Resources

The goal of the *RACE Are We So Different?* project was to produce a traveling museum exhibit, a website, and educational materials to convey a comprehensive and integrative story about race and human variation. The story, geared for middle-school aged children through adults, relays three overall messages:

- Race is a recent human invention;
- Race is about culture, not biology; and
- Race and racism are embedded in our institutions and everyday life.

The exhibit and website present three themes:

- The history of the idea of race;
- The science of human variation; and
- The experience of living with race and racism.

The interactive website (<http://www.understandingRACE.org>) includes a virtual tour of the *RACE* exhibit, videos, historical timelines, and quizzes. It



This photograph of people on a bus welcomes visitors to the RACE Are We So Different? exhibit. One of many images of community life, taken by Wing Young Huie, featured in the exhibit. Photo: Mary Margaret Overbey.

also includes scholarly papers, written specifically for the conferences and activities supported by the project, and a bibliography.

Teachers and families can access educational materials in the website's resources section (www.understandingRACE.org/resources/index.html). Two teacher's guides, one for middle school teachers and one for high school teachers, present race and human variation through the integrated lenses of biology, culture, and history. The guides meet national and select state standards for science, biology, social studies, and social science and provide more than 10 lesson plans that address human biological variation, cultural variation, and the experience of living with race and racism. The teacher's guides include some of the background material and lesson plans published in a related resource for teachers, *How Real Is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology* by Carol Mukhopadhyay, Rosemary Henze and Yolanda Moses (Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2007).

The lesson plans are designed to be infused into existing curriculum, and we encourage teachers to consider team teaching. For example, a biology teacher, a history teacher, and a social science teacher may want to work together to design a module that integrates the science of human variation with the history and lived experience of race in their classes.

A family guide, also in the website's resources section, helps parents talk to small children about race. It presents activities, stories, and exercises for parents and chil-



Calipers and hair samples are among the tools scientists used to measure human differences from early to mid-1900s. The calipers belonged to William Montague Cobb, the first African American physical anthropologist. Photo: Mary Margaret Overbey.



A high school cafeteria table invites visitors to listen in on students' conversation about race and how race affects where they sit in the cafeteria and how they think about themselves and others. Photo: by Mary Margaret Overbey.

dren to do together as well as suggestions for discussions about race.

A glossary complements the teacher's guides and family guide. We found that there is no common language for talking about race so we developed a glossary to assist teachers, students, parents, and scholars in discussing race.

Project Background

I want to emphasize a few points about the experience of developing the *RACE Are We So Different?* program.

First, understanding peoples' perception of race and human variation was important. We undertook extensive audience research to ensure that we had a good idea of what people think about race. Over the course of the project, we interviewed students at a diverse high school, interviewed visitors at two museums, held focus groups, and convened fourteen community meetings at seven museum sites across the U.S. to better learn how people talk about race, what they want to know about race, and what suggestions they had on how to draw others to an exhibit, website and educational materials on race. From this research, we learned that people are fascinated by human differences and similarities, and they want to know more about race and human variation. Although conversations were not easy, people wanted to talk about how race affected their communities and their lives.

Second, we designed this as an interdisciplinary project from the start to ensure inclusion of many critical aspects of race and human variation, from the history of the idea of race, to the genetics of human variation, to the effects of racism on education, health and housing. Diversity also was central to the effort, and we worked to make certain that there was diverse representation in the planning and development of the program and in all project activities. A diverse, multidisciplinary 22-person Advisory Board of scholars oversaw the effort. As a result of this interdisciplinary approach, the complicated story of race is made understandable. Visitors can see and understand how science, society, and government shaped the idea of race in such a way that it remains a powerful force that continues to impact our institutions and everyday lives.

Third, developing the *RACE Are We So Different?* program was a collaborative effort, involving more than 20 organizations, including the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History and seven other museums. The AAA worked with the Science Museum of Minnesota to develop the exhibit, S2N Media, Inc. to develop the website, Randi Korn & Associates to evaluate the exhibit, Museum Solutions to evaluate the website, and Marmillion + Company to develop a communications strategy and materials. More than 150 individuals contrib-



Piles of money show the wealth disparities that exist among those who identify as white, Asian, African American, and Hispanic/Latino. The exhibit explains how wealth accumulation occurred. Photo: Mary Margaret Overbey.

uted to the project. It took many people and organizations working together to make the *RACE Are We So Different?* program what it is, and we believe the very positive public response demonstrates that the result was well worth the effort.

I encourage you to visit the *RACE Are We So Different?* website, acquaint yourself with the variety and range of activities, review and use the teacher's guides and glossary. If the RACE exhibit comes to your city or nearby, consider taking your students to visit, or take a virtual tour of the exhibit with your students and incorporate a lesson plan in your class. I think you and your students will be glad you did.

Reference

Mukhopadhyay, Carol, Rosemary Henze and Yolanda Moses. 2007. *How Real Is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

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A turn of the century ceremonial vest with American flags stands in contrast to signs illustrating discrimination. The exhibit explores "white" as a racial category. Photo: Mary Margaret Overbey.