



# Ethnic Studies Lesson 1D: Introduction—Biological Determinism

**TOPIC:**  
INTRODUCTION

**GRADE LEVELS:**  
11-12

**TIME:**  
1½ HOURS

## California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Themes, Values, and Principles Alignment

### *Theme:*

1. Systems of Power

### *Values and Principles:*

1. Critique empire building in history and its relationship to white supremacy, racism, and other forms of power and oppression.
2. Challenge racist, bigoted, discriminatory, and imperialist/colonial beliefs and practices on multiple levels.

## California English and Social Science Standards Alignment

### *English Language Arts Standards (11th and 12th Grade):*

#### Reading—Informational Text (RI.11-12)

Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging. (RI.11-12.5)

#### Writing—(W.11-12)

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. (W.11-12.1)

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (W.11-12.5)

### *Social Sciences Standards (11th and 12th Grade):*

#### History-Social Science Content Standards—(Grades 9-12)

Analyze the impact of biological determinism on scientific racism, eugenics, and US chattel slavery, including its role in shaping ideologies and policies. (History-Social Science Content Standard 8.7)

Understand the historical and contemporary implications of scientific racism, eugenics, and biological determinism on society, including their impact on race relations, social inequality, and human rights. (History-Social Science Content Standard 11.2)

## Lesson Purpose

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Students will research biological determinism and its role in scientific racism, eugenics, and US chattel slavery.

## Essential Questions

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*How did the concept of biological determinism impact scientific racism, eugenics, and the justification for US chattel slavery?*

*Why is studying American history through ethnicity important?*

## Materials

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[University of Delaware: Race: The Power of an Illusion, Ep. 1](#)

[PBS: The Origin of Race in the USA](#)

[1B: Support KWL Chart](#)

## Vocabulary

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scientific determinism

eugenics

chattel slavery

biological determinism

scientific racism

DNA

## Lesson Steps

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### Step 1:

- As a class, remind students that our current understanding of race and our historical understanding are different. Have students watch the first 5 minutes and 8 seconds of [University of Delaware: Race: The Power of an Illusion, Ep. 1](#) (video 57 minutes, 2 seconds). As students watch, have them make predictions about what they expect to learn about DNA patterns. What do they believe will be confirmations of the students' beliefs and what will be a surprise?
- When students have finished watching the video, have them pair with another student and share their answers. As a class, ask student pairs to share their predictions. Let students know that this video from 2003 is part of a larger three-part series. Let students know they will learn more about DNA sequencing results in the related homework assignment.

### Step 2:

- As a class, remind students that race—determined by biology or biological determinism—had a definition in the past that is very different from today. Divide students into five expert groups. While student groups watch their portion of the video, they should take notes in order to create an expert class poster that gives at least six points about their subject.

## INTRODUCTION

- Phrenology, [University of Delaware: Race: The Power of an Illusion](#) (minutes 10:20-12:03)
  - Scientific Racism or Polygenism, [University of Delaware: Race: The Power of an Illusion](#) (minutes 12:09-15:29)
  - Eugenics, [The University of Delaware: Race: The Power of an Illusion](#) (minutes 15:30-18:52)
  - Stereotypes of Race and Physical Attributes, [University of Delaware: Race: The Power of an Illusion](#) (minutes 19:06-22:01)
  - Skin Color, [University of Delaware: Race: The Power of an Illusion](#) (minutes 22:01-25:53).
- When students have completed their posters, have the class walk the room in a gallery style and put their questions on sticky notes on the posters. As a class, have students present their posters and answer questions.

### **Step 3:**

- As a class, ask students how this biological determinism may have been used to justify slavery in the US. Have students watch [PBS: The Origin of Race in the USA](#) (video 9 minutes, 22 seconds). As students watch, have them take notes on how biological determinism was used to justify slavery.
- When the video is complete, have students pair up to discuss their notes. As a class, have pairs of students share their notes.

### **Step 4:**

- As a class, ask students this lesson's questions, "How did the concept of biological determinism impact scientific racism, eugenics, and the justification for US chattel slavery?" and this unit's question, "Why is studying American history through ethnicity important?" Make note of what was learned on this unit's KWL chart—along with additional questions.

## Essential Question Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection

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As time permits and for homework, have students watch [University of Delaware: Race: The Power of an Illusion](#) (minutes 32:58-38:31). As students watch, have them take notes on what surprises them about the answers to the students' DNA sequencing and the research on the difference in DNA between different groups.

## Additional Readings and Resources

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### [Independent Institute: Eugenics in High School History, Failure to Confront the Past](#)

Leonard, Thomas C. "Retrospectives: Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 207-224.

Leonard, Thomas C. *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016.

Leonard, Thomas C. "More Merciful and Not Less Effective: Eugenics and Progressive-Era American Economics." *History of Political Economy* 64, no. 3 (2003): 757-791.

### [National Library of Medicine: Eugenics and Involuntary Sterilization: 1907-2015](#)

Okrent, Daniel. *The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics, and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America*. Scribner's, 2019.

Spiro, Jonathan Peter. *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant*. University of Vermont Press, 2009.

## INTRODUCTION

**NOTE TO EDUCATORS REGARDING ADDITIONAL READINGS AND RESOURCES:** America is a pluralistic country, ethnically. It is also a pluralistic country politically—left, right, and center. Ethnic studies educators have ready access to resources from the left-of-center in the [2021 California Model Curriculum](#) and in the [Liberated Model Curriculum](#). This Comparative Cultures Ethnic Studies curriculum favors teachers exposing students to views from across the political spectrum. Educators often lack guidance to materials from outside the left-of-center. Therefore, in the sections on Additional Readings and Resources, the Comparative Cultures Ethnic Studies curriculum alerts educators to credible resources that provide an alternative to the other Model Curricula. In doing so, this curriculum encourages educators to acquaint students with evidence-based views from left, right, and center.

## Ethnic Studies 1B: KWL Chart

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**KNOW****WONDER****LEARNED**

*What do we think we already know about this topic?*

*What do we wonder about this topic? Write your questions below.*

*After the research is completed, what did we learn? Make sure to cite your source.*

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