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Greater Good

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Greater Good (ISSN 1553-3239) collects, synthesizes, and interprets groundbreaking scientific research into the roots of compassion, altruism, and peaceful human relationships. It fuses this cutting edge science with inspiring stories, promoting dialogue between social scientists and parents, educators, community leaders, and policy makers.

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Greater Good
SCIENCE CENTER

ARE WE REALLY LIVING IN A “post-racial” America?

Popular wisdom presumes that Barack Obama’s presidential nomination signals an end to racial prejudices and divisions in the United States.

Social realities suggest something different. Consider recent furors over comments made by Jeremiah Wright and Don Imus, the shooting of Sean Bell by New York City police officers, the prosecution of the Jena Six in New Orleans—all of which elicited cries of racial prejudice and victimization among whites and blacks alike. A recent ABC News poll found that 30 percent of Americans admit to harboring racist feelings.

It’s tough to reconcile some of these facts with the historical milestone that is Obama’s candidacy. Indeed, today’s political climate raises provocative questions about the origins and durability of prejudice. Where do our prejudices come from? Why are some people more prejudiced than others? Is it possible for individuals, and a society as a whole, truly to move past these prejudices?

Fortunately, these are questions social scientists have been exploring for years. In this issue of *Greater Good*, we examine cutting-edge research into the sources and effects of prejudice, and we reveal new paths to overcoming racism. We’ve devoted special attention to racial prejudice, but most of the research we cover in this issue also applies to prejudices based on ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.

Much of this research confounds the possibility of a “post-racial” anything. In her lead essay, Susan Fiske, a leading scientific authority on prejudice, shows that our prejudices have deep psychological roots. Study after study has found that, especially when it comes to race, these prejudices can be detected even in our brain activity. What’s more, their origins stretch back to infancy: As psychologist Allison Briscoe-Smith reports in her essay, kids notice racial differences as early as six months old.

But our contributors make clear that this is only half the story. While we may have knee-jerk biases against the different and the unfamiliar, research has also identified steps we can take—on an individual and societal level—to help mitigate these prejudices.

In her essay, Briscoe-Smith explains how, through candid and pro-active conversations, parents can help their kids make healthy and constructive sense of racial differences. Jennifer Holladay, interim

director of the renowned Teaching Tolerance program at the Southern Poverty Law Center, offers educators a four-pronged plan for reducing prejudice in schools. University of California, Berkeley, psychologist Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton considers how we can overcome harmful stereotypes that link race to intellectual ability, and his Berkeley colleague Jennifer Chatman shares what she’s learned about how organizations can reduce prejudice in the workplace.

Finally, reporting on the experiences of biracial people, Rebecca Walker provides a glimpse of what a true multicultural America might look like—not a colorblind society, as some propose, but one in which differences are recognized and embraced, not stigmatized.

These essays suggest that we may never be able to ignore racial and ethnic differences, but we can change how we respond to them. As Fiske explains, our prejudices are sensitive to social context, rising or falling based on factors that range from the amount of stress in our lives to our frequency of contact with people of other races. A post-racial society might not be possible, but it is certainly within our power to build a post-prejudice society.



Jonathan Payne

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Jason Marsh

Coming up in *Greater Good*:

Who Can You Trust? (Fall 2008)

Trust is essential to families, friendships, governments, businesses, and even the global economy—and yet it has been declining for years. This issue will explore how we can understand and rebuild trust.

Arts and Smarts (Winter 2008-09)

New research suggests the arts may boost students’ academic performance, but many scientists aren’t convinced. So what are the arts good for these days? We’ll consider therapeutic, emotional, cognitive, and other benefits of the arts.