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Racial discrimination may be easier to eradicate than was previously thought.

I IT had been the days of 20th-century eugenics, scientists who had scoured the table of social Darwinism would construct evolutionary trees that had twigs within the species Homo sapiens. Each twig was a racial group. The top twig was, of course, the white Caucasian one—since the scientists who did this work were themselves white Caucasians.

Modern genetics has shown the error of their ways. Systematic genetic differences between people from different parts of the world, though they exist, are small compared with variations between people from the same place. The visible differences—such as skin color—are the result of a mere handful of genes. Under the skin, humanity is remarkably homogeneous.

Racism, however, is ubiquitous. It is not only white Caucasians (whatever that term means, in the context of current knowledge) who are guilty of it. That has led to another biological hypothesis, that people are somehow "programmed" to re-recognise one and be racist.

Robert Kurzban, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, three evolutionary psychologists who work at the University of California at Santa Barbara, find this hypothesis unfounded. And this week they have published a paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences that supports an alternative hypothesis.

That hypothesis is that racism is actually disfavored by product of another phenomenon—a tendency to assign people to "coalition groups", and to use whatever cues are available, be they clothing, accent or skin colour, to slot individuals into such groups (or "stereotypes") as them, as modern usage might term it. The good news is that experiments done by the researchers suggest that such stereotypes are easily dissolved and replaced with others. Racism, in other words, can be eliminated.

You want to be in my gang?

For many years, psychologists have believed that they had found data to support the idea that, when somebody encounters a stranger, the stranger's characteristics are slotted into three pigeon-holes: sex, age and race. These pigeon-holes are assumed to be long-established, biologically programmed mental faculties.

The sexes and ages of other people are social contexts in which decisions have to be made all the time, so the idea of evolved pigeon-holes to deal with these categories makes sense. The reason for scepticism about the third category is that, for most of their evolutionary history, human beings would never have been exposed to individuals of other races. It is therefore hard to see how a specifically racial pigeon-holing system could have arisen.

On the other hand, there was probably good reason to want to be able to place a stranger within the system of tribal groups, coalitions and alliances that early man would have had to deal with among his neighbours. To the extent that the individuals in those groups had things in common, those things might mark an unindividuated group member.

Learning the wrong associations between markers and groups, though, would be maladaptive, so a flexible approach to such markers, discarding them when they prove useless, might be expected. Following this line of thinking, Dr Kurzban, Dr Tooby and Dr Cosmides predicted that, in circumstances in which race was irrelevant, the ways that groups of allies form, perception would vanish, possibly rapidly.

To test this idea they used an established psychological technique called the "category validity" test. This involves showing subjects a series of photographs, together with statements of a conversation that those people are supposed to be having.

After that (and without having been warned what to expect) the subject is shown the sentences in a random order, and asked who said what. The information the subject receives from misattributions of words to pictures. Subjects tend to confuse who said what within groups that they have constructed, especially from the information available, rather than between those groups. But the only data available to the subject (and to groups) are the words and pictures, so the researcher can work out which criteria are being unconsciously used.

Dr Kurzban, Dr Tooby and Dr Cosmides used two variations of the protocol. In Monday's photograph, young men were assigned by computer to one side of the conversation, and they were told, with each side receiving two black and two white men. In the first variation, the content of the conversation was the traditional dis-