America Has a Big Race Problem
When it comes to racial bias, nurture trumped nature quite some time ago.

By Jeff Nesbit, Contributor | March 28, 2016, at 12:01 a.m.

The Civil War ended nearly 151 years ago, but the battle between the races rages on. One example: While many in the South embrace the Confederate flag as a sign of heritage, many in the African-American community view it as a symbol of hate. (WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY IMAGES)

We clearly have a problem in America.

When almost 90 percent of white people in America who take the Implicit Association Test show an inherent racial bias for white people versus black people, that means something.

When young, black teenaged men are shot and killed by white police officers and trigger extraordinarily intense social commentary about racial tension in communities like Ferguson, Missouri, it means we haven't solved the equation yet.

When a mentally unbalanced, young, white man sits quietly in a historic, black church during a Bible study for an hour and then kills nine black parishioners in order to start a race war, it's more than just an isolated incident. When America's first black president feels compelled to use part of his State of the Union address midway through his second term in office to talk about the state of the dialogue between blacks and whites in America, it means we haven't reached a point where we can genuinely talk about the issue of racial bias in the criminal justice system, in educational settings and in workplace hiring.

We need a new, national conversation about race – about what it means when nearly every white person in America carries around an implicit racial bias that subconsciously prefers white people over black people in social, professional and educational settings. It's black and white. It's that stark. And we need to start on that conversation as soon as possible.

So why aren't we having that national conversation? Why does it only break out into the open after incidents like the Trayvon Martin shooting in Florida, or the Michael Brown shooting in Missouri? Dozens of national polls in America during the past two decades consistently show more than three-quarters of us don't believe we have a problem with racial tension in America. Fewer and fewer Americans openly admit that they're racist, these polls have shown for years. But a more nuanced study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago found that many Americans still do, in fact, harbor beliefs about racial and ethnic minorities that are based on racist stereotypes.

The study used a sophisticated and carefully weighted questionnaire with a range of possible answers that evaluated up to seven different characteristics about a variety of groups, religions and ethnicities. Since it included a range of characteristics, and a variety of groups that didn't isolate blacks or whites, the survey was able to go more deeply into racial stereotypes. "More than half the
survey respondents rated African-Americans as less intelligent than whites," Diversity Digest wrote about the novel University of Chicago research. "[About] 57 percent of non-African-Americans rated African-Americans as less intelligent than whites and 30 percent of African-Americans themselves rated African-Americans as less intelligent than whites; 62 percent of the entire sample rated African-Americans as lazier than whites; and more than 3 out of 4 survey respondents said that African-Americans are more inclined than whites to prefer welfare over work."

Those are shocking statistics – and completely out of line with what people now tell national polling firms about what they would like their views on race to sound like. Almost 60 percent of non-African-Americans believe blacks are less intelligent than whites? Almost a third of blacks feel they're less intelligent than whites? Two-thirds of us believe that black people are lazier than white people? Three-quarters of us believe that blacks are more interested in welfare than work?

A protester takes part in a demonstration outside of Chicago City Hall on Dec. 11, 2015.

SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES

We've certainly made substantial progress since the repeal of the Jim Crow laws. But we also clearly have substantial work to do in America. Younger generations believe we live in a post-racial society where we don't see the color of someone's skin. We aspire, as a nation, to move past the pain and injustice of the Civil War and Jim Crow, and believe that we have. It's a deep, heartfelt wish.

The problem is that aspiration isn't meeting reality in America right now.

When white people take the IAT – a popular online test developed by Yale social science researchers to test our inherent racial biases – most are surprised and appalled at the results, because 88 percent of those who take the test discover that they reflexively and subconsciously associate images of black people with words like "bad" and images of white people with words like "good."

Catalyst, the organization that helped jumpstart the "glass ceiling" debate in corporate America through a series of polls among women in the workplace, found that black women see a "concrete ceiling" in the workplace – not a glass ceiling. They don’t see an opportunity to move up into the top echelons of the workplace, they can't even see them.

In both cases, these aren’t questions of aspiration, they are questions of what we carry around in our brains. They are examples of what we learn, what we know. When it comes to racial bias, nurture trumped nature quite some time ago.

**Born Without Prejudice**
We aren’t born with prejudices about race. It isn’t something that's encoded in our DNA. It’s based on perception. It’s something we learn over time through repetition in all forms of media, in conversations, in dialogues, in the way that we interact socially in our daily lives. But here’s the extraordinarily good news: If racial prejudices are something that we learn, it means that we can unlearn them as well.
Prejudice uses "many of the same tools that help our minds figure out what's good and what's bad," David Amodio, a New York University cognitive neuroscientist, told journalist Chris Mooney. Our brains are wired in evolutionary terms to respond to threats quickly and efficiently.

For instance, we have learned to very quickly identify a grizzly bear in the wild as "dangerous," Amodio said. The trouble we face today, as a society, is when our brains use similar processes to form negative views about groups of people.

But neuroscience and social science research suggests that once we understand the psychological pathways that lead to prejudice, then we are able to actually train our brains to go in the opposite direction. In order to understand those pathways, we have to identify them, talk about them, explore them, express them – and then start to act on them.

Like an athlete who wants to learn how to be a pro, we have to train our brains. In training, you make mistakes. You stumble and fall. You have good days and bad. But, as you train, you learn. And, eventually, through training, you become much better at the sport you set out to master. Practice really does make perfect. It’s the same with our brains.

The dialogue starts with our leaders. Race relations have improved in America in the past 40 or 50 years, President Barack Obama has said. "We have made enormous progress in race relations over the course of the last several decades," he said in November 2015. "I have witnessed that in my own life and to deny that progress, I think, is to deny America's capacity to change."

He's right, of course. America has the capacity to change. Race relations have improved in the past generation. But we clearly still have a problem. We can't pretend that it doesn't exist.

If we'd solved the equation – if we truly were living in a post-racial society in all aspects of America today – then we wouldn't continue to struggle with inequity in the criminal justice system; with imbalances in public education in urban cities; or with the very real "concrete ceiling" for black women in the workplace.

There's only one way to work our way out of the box we find ourselves in. We need a new conversation – one that includes equal measures of hope and pain, threat and opportunity, conflict and resolution. We need to train. We need to start talking about it without fear of making a mistake. Only then can we get to the society we aspire to live in.

We need to start sharing stories – some personal, some painful. It's the only real way that we can change what we've learned. The human species is a remarkably adaptive species, thanks to our brain and mind. It's time we start exercising that gift.
After reading the article, please thoughtfully respond to the following questions.

1. Consider how racism is still prevalent in today's society. Using one of the examples mentioned in the beginning of the article OR one you can think of on your own, compare it to the plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. How is today's racism similar - or different - to that in the novel?

2. Based on what you read in the article, what are (or might be) some reasons for racism in today's society?

3. In your opinion, has today's society grown in terms of issues with racism compared to the society in 1930s Alabama? If so, what factors do you think have contributed to this? If not, explain why.