

Champions of Psychology: Jennifer Eberhardt

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This is an ongoing series in which highly regarded professors share advice on the successes and challenges facing graduate students. Jennifer L. Eberhardt received a PhD in Psychology from Harvard University in 1993. Before coming to Stanford in 1998, she held a joint faculty position at Yale University in Psychology and African & African American Studies where she was also a research fellow at Yale's Center for Race, Inequality, and Politics. At Stanford, she has conducted programs of research in areas ranging from social neuroscience to the intersection of psychology and law. In her most recent work, she examines how social representations of race can affect visual perception and neural processing. In 2002, she received a Distinguished Alumnae Award for this research from the University of Cincinnati (where she completed her undergraduate education in 1987). She is a research fellow at the Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity (CCSRE). Additionally, she joins Hazel Markus in directing the Mind, Culture, and Society specialization track for advanced psychology undergraduates. She has served on the Committee of Visitors for the National Science Foundation. She is currently a member of the Association for Psychological Science, the American Psychological Association, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. During the 2005-2006 academic year, Jennifer served as a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences.

APSSC: What led you to choose psychology as your career path?

Eberhardt: I actually began college as a design major. I loved the visual arts. I wanted a career that would provide a great deal of space for creativity. I wanted a career that would allow me to imagine. My time in design school did not turn out as planned. Every new project, from designing cardboard chairs to hold 200 pounds to building bird cages from wire, I greeted with a bit more misery than the last project. I decided to change my major to psychology because I thought, for me, this discipline was better suited to feed my imagination and creativity. I was right. I loved learning about research and later conducting studies, each of which I greeted with even more enthusiasm than the last study. I became committed to the discipline and I never looked back.

APSSC: How did you go about developing your current research interests?

Eberhardt: I have been interested in social perception and inequality since I was a young child. That interest was intensified when, as a junior high school student, I moved from a neighborhood that was exclusively populated by Black people to a neighborhood that was almost exclusively populated by Jewish people of European descent. The neighborhoods were just a short bike ride away from one another, yet they were worlds apart in terms of culture and resources. From this experience, I also developed an interest in race and face perception for the first time.

APSSC: How did you select your graduate program?

Eberhardt: As an undergraduate, I actually worked really hard to gather information on dozens of schools at the beginning of my junior year. I ordered all of the application materials a year early just so I would have a better idea about what the various schools looked for and how to better prepare. As it turns

out, when I was a senior, I began to doubt whether psychology was the right move to make. Most of the examples of Black Americans who were academically successful that I had heard about throughout my lifetime were not psychologists but doctors, lawyers, and engineers. I found it difficult to explain why I wanted to be a psychologist and thus I began doubting my focus on psychology as a career path. When it came time to apply to graduate school, I only applied to two places: the University of Cincinnati (which is where I was an undergraduate) and Harvard. I was accepted to both. I had imagined that I would have a tough time making a decision about what to do. However, when I tried to explain why I would want to turn down Harvard to stay at the University of Cincinnati, it did not make sense to people, especially not to my parents. So I went to Harvard.

APSSC: What were the most rewarding aspects of graduate school for you?

Eberhardt: The most rewarding aspects of graduate school for me were discovering that I actually could come up with good ideas from time to time and learning how to pursue those ideas scientifically.

APSSC: What common mistakes do you see graduate students making?

Eberhardt: The most common mistake I see graduate students making is for them to begin conducting research in an area, simply because that area is “hot.” It is really hard to do your best work when you are not completely passionate about it. So even though it may seem like the best choice or the most practical choice to invest in the “hot” area, your most creative work, your most inspired work, is much more likely to happen in the area that you care about most.

APSSC: What suggestions do you have for choosing a mentor?

Eberhardt: Choose a mentor you respect. Choose a mentor who will allow you to develop in ways consistent with your goals. Choose a mentor from whom you can receive criticism.

APSSC: How does a graduate student become a first-rate researcher?

Eberhardt: Work hard and consistently over long stretches of time. Do not expect or rely upon immediate positive feedback. Find joy in what you do.

APSSC: How did you go about getting your first job once you had attained your degree? How long were you employed at your first job?

Eberhardt: My first job was at Yale University. I was an Assistant Professor of Psychology and of African & African American Studies for three years. It was an experience that continues to shape my professional development.

APSSC: If you could design the ideal program for training graduate students, what would it be like?

Eberhardt: I would design a program that would focus on sharpening the imagination of students as well as on developing specific skills.