

The Magnitude of Our Mythology

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Jennifer L. Eberhardt and Jennifer A. Richeson explore the persistent mythology of racial progress and its impact in areas including diversity, polarization, and public trust.

Eberhardt and Richeson spoke on December 7, 2021. Edited excerpts of their conversation follow.

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Jennifer L. Eberhardt

EBERHARDT: A major theme in your program of research is what you call the mythology of racial progress in America. Can you describe that?

RICHESON: The mythology is simply a prevailing narrative in our country that progress toward racial equality in U.S. society is steadily, linearly, naturally, and automatically getting better across time. Whether we begin in the relatively recent past or the more distant past—let’s just say when slavery was still legal or before the civil rights movement—people usually think, “Yes, racism, discrimination did exist then, Jim Crow was bad, but surely, perhaps with some help from the Supreme Court or legislation or through activism or all of the above, we’ve steadily gotten better as a country, right? Things have become far more racially egalitarian and will continue to do so.”

EBERHARDT: Walk us through some of the studies you’ve conducted so we can get a closer view of how this mythology works.

RICHESON: Well, we’re only getting started, even though it feels like we’ve done a lot. And I should

say the mythology piece of this is mostly the claim that this larger narrative is omnipresent. It's a part of our cultural story, and so much so that it has this mythic status, right? That's why I call it mythology, but we do have evidence of what I would consider the operation of this narrative of racial progress: that people believe we have largely achieved racial equality in society and that our progress toward it has been and is continuous, unfolding linearly, naturally, and perhaps even automatically. You see it almost everywhere once you start looking.

One place where we've tested this involves what people think is true about the economic gaps between White Americans and Black Americans. For instance, ask the average American about the share of wealth—the disparity between White Americans and Black Americans—say, 10 years ago, 20 years ago. I did this with a team of students, former trainees, and my close collaborator Michael Kraus at the Yale School of Management. We asked a representative sample of American adults to estimate the Black–White wealth gap at 12 points across time, starting in 1963 until 2016, which was the last date that we could get data on at the time. We compared their responses to the actual data collected by the federal government, and we saw two striking things: One, people are really wrong about the magnitude of the Black–White wealth gap, both today and in the past. In this one study I'm referencing, published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, participants on average thought the average Black family had just under half the wealth of the average White family in 1963. In 2016, respondents on average thought that gap had almost closed, to where the average Black family had about 90% of the wealth of the average White family. And if you look at respondents' estimates for dates between 1963 and 2016, you see this nice, beautiful linear upward function. So, it seems that Americans are imposing this upward linear pattern on their perceptions of change in the Black–White racial wealth gap over time.

What's even more striking, however, is the reality of the actual Black–White wealth gap across these years and now. Whereas most people thought the average Black family had about 45% of the wealth of the average White family in 1963, the reality was about 5%. If you break it into whole numbers, that means if the average White family had \$100 of wealth then the average Black family had \$5.

EBERHARDT: Wow.



Jennifer A. Richeson

RICHESON: Okay? And although the difference has moved slightly over the past 60 years, it hasn't moved that much, nor has it only moved in the direction of greater equality. Over time, the trend is actually pretty flat; it's nothing like the linear, ever-steady march to equality that people imagine. It gets a little bit better in some years, and then it gets a little bit worse, but it doesn't come close to reaching what people thought it was in 1963, much less what they estimated for 2016. The reality is that the Black–White wealth gap is not much better now than it was in 1963: In 2016, the median White family had 10 times the wealth of the median Black family.

And this is not even accounting for the impact of COVID-19, of course. There's every reason to believe that COVID has just decimated Black American households, both in terms of lives lost and also economic well-being, which are related. The estimates only come out every 3 years or so, and we expect that racial disparities in wealth will continue to be pretty staggering.

EBERHARDT: Yeah, I'm eager to see the data. What do you think is driving this overestimation of progress?

RICHESON: A few things. We think some of this is because most Americans really do want society to be more egalitarian, so some of it is wishful thinking that organizes our cognitions to pay attention to our desire to live in a society that both espouses and has achieved racial equality. Part of it is that sense of, "This is who we are." In fact, that's part of the problem too, right? Because if we believe this is fundamentally who we are, then we believe that over time we will achieve it in reality. It won't be aspirational; it's like racial equality is a preordained outcome for the United States. That's part of the mythology. But what it does, like anything else we so desire to believe, is organize our perception, our memory, our cognition around those goals. As a result, we might pay more attention to evidence in the historical record or even in the present that favors racial progress and ignore contradictory evidence.

I am not arguing that there's been no racial progress or that evidence of progress is illusory. It's just that progress toward racial equality is not automatic, it's not linear, it's not only moving in one direction, and it's certainly not preordained or natural. That means there will be evidence of progress, like the first Black president or the first woman, first South Asian, vice president, right?

EBERHARDT: Yes. Or we can point to evidence of progress in the legal changes that came about with the civil rights movement. The changes in policies, the opening of doors.

RICHESON: Exactly, all of those things. Those are examples of actual progress, not just symbolic. We know that the actual rise in the Black middle class happened because of changes in the law. We know that voting rights had actual, tangible, important outcomes that are relevant to racial equality and that helped to close gaps on economic and other measures of social equality. The problem is when we focus solely on these positive examples—when we remember them more strongly than the evidence of backlash, pushback, and retrenchment that also happened, often in response to these things. An example is Kamala Harris getting elected and then January 6 happening. People who follow this narrative are more likely to focus on Kamala Harris than on January 6. We remember *Brown v. Board of Education* [the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case that declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional], but we don't remember how it resulted in the closing of Black schools, the firing of Black teachers and principals, and, in some places, the decision to close rather than desegregate the public schools, along with the privatization of all sorts of public facilities, in

order to maintain segregation. And, oddly, we tend to erase even the evidence of racial progress that happened during Reconstruction [the effort to grant equal protection under the Constitution to newly freed/formerly enslaved people after the U.S. Civil War] because it was so short-lived due to backlash in the form of racial violence, including lynchings and massacres and, ultimately the rise of Jim Crow laws.

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EBERHARDT: We suppress some truths as we elevate the others.

RICHESON: Exactly. When we're asked what that state of racial equality is today compared to what it was even 30 or 50 years ago, we think, "Well, obviously things are much better," right? Without any hesitation. And, for many outcomes, this is simply not true. Racial gaps in wealth, in home ownership, and in several markers of health are as big and in some cases bigger than they were 30 years ago. We're motivated to believe this, in part, because our culture emphasizes this progress narrative. The movies we see, the literature we read often have a redemptive arc whereby the racial prejudice and inequality of "the past" is overcome. Of course, this could be changing and not in a way that will lead us to be a more equitable and just nation. There's this conversation about what books and stories should be taught not in just elementary school, middle school, and high school, but also in college. There's this sort of effort to teach "patriotic education," which, it seems (based on what is and is not potentially being banned) is the education that makes us feel like everything is fine and has always been fine. So, ironically, the abandonment of the racial progress narrative may be due to a complete denial that the nation ever had a violently unequal past. As if, "we don't even need to have the narrative anymore—we can just let go of all of it and just say that everything's always been fine." Which is terrifying.

EBERHARDT: There must be a race difference in the extent to which this is happening. Are Black and White Americans equally likely to misconstrue this racial progress, or are Black people less likely to do so?

RICHESON: Great question. Black people are less likely to overestimate both progress toward and actual gaps in racial economic outcomes, but they still do it. And by "they," I mean "we"; everybody does this. But Black Americans do it less than White Americans, and low-income Americans in many of our studies, irrespective of race, do this less than high-income Americans.

And you can see why, at least in the income or economic domain. If you want to believe that your financial outcomes are due to only your hard work and effort, your "just deserts," and not in part due to structural barriers such as racial discrimination and other advantages, then you're also motivated to overestimate the current state of racial economic equality. To believe that things are fair and better than they actually are. Because evidence of structural, systemic barriers to success based on race (as well as other factors) calls into question whether your own high income is solely due to your own hard work, talent, merit. To contend with that can be threatening.

EBERHARDT: Right. I'm wondering about other countries. Are Americans unique in this regard? Or,

if you looked at inequality anywhere else in the world, would people in different countries have the same motivation?

RICHESON: It's a great question, and I don't have a really good answer because we and others haven't looked at enough places around the world. But I don't think it's unique to the United States, especially in terms of perceptions of progress in other social domains that are valued here and in other countries.

For instance, people in Israel and Canada overestimate the percentage of women who are corporate CEOs and in other high-level management roles. Gender equality is valued in any number of countries but still not achieved, and you see similar effects in terms of an imposed linearity of perceived progress toward gender equality, at least in Canada. Research by Rachel Ruttan at the University of Toronto has found that people continue to think that surely there are more women in these roles today than there were 10 years ago, and there will naturally be even more women in those roles 10 years from now, even if nothing changes.

But, I think the racial-progress narrative is very much connected to our specific cultural story, our national story, of being exceptional. Americans tend to think of themselves as exceptional in any number of ways and of being a land of free people who get to determine their own destiny, not bound by blood or caste, because that's in our Declaration of Independence, right? It's part of who we understand ourselves to be. All the evidence to the contrary, including the foundational role of slavery in this country, is an obstacle, a threat that we have to psychologically manage somehow.

EBERHARDT: Right.

RICHESON: So we tell ourselves things like, okay, we acknowledge we got it wrong at the beginning, but then we had a civil war about slavery and lots of White people died for it. We take that as evidence of our national commitment to being racially egalitarian. We also had a judicial correction with Supreme Court cases like *Loving v. Virginia* [which struck down state laws banning interracial marriage in 1967] and *Brown*, as well as the civil rights movement. But we forget that Martin Luther King and other people were assassinated because of their efforts to engender those changes.

But people even see those examples as part of the story—in the sense of, yes, we had to go through that difficult moment to get “back on track” toward our ultimate destination of racial equality. That's what we tell ourselves, as opposed to the realities of racial progress and social progress more broadly, where efforts to dismantle structural barriers to equality and full enfranchisement are often met by backlash and measures to weaken them or work around them. There's this sense that we're on the road to racial equality, making good progress even, and as long as we avoid the little ditches here and there, we'll be okay. But we have to constantly fight and agitate for equity, for justice, and be vigilant for signs and instances of injustice; we have to track what's happening where, to whom, and how. This is the reality, rather than the mythology, of racial progress. I think about the climate change clock that's counting backward down to the point where climate change is irreversible. We almost need to be in a similar posture around these efforts to create a more just, free, and equitable society.

We remember *Brown v. Board of Education*, but we don't remember how it resulted in the closing of Black schools, the firing of Black teachers and principals, and, in some

places, the decision to close rather than desegregate the public schools, along with the privatization of all sorts of public facilities, in order to maintain segregation. —Jennifer A. Richeson

EBERHARDT: Do you feel this is a different form of cognitive dissonance? It sounds like a lot of work is going into maintaining the current attitude.

RICHESON: Yeah. It's maintaining a distorted perception of reality in order to maintain your beliefs about the society you live in, the nation you identify with. We don't like to acknowledge our moral failings as individuals, or those of the groups that we value and identify with. And one way to not acknowledge them, well, is to not acknowledge what's happening in the world or in our country—the reality that there continue to be vast racial inequalities in our country today. And when we're confronted with evidence that things might not be as equal as we thought, we often respond with psychological gymnastics to explain or rationalize it away. You see this in our data, too.

EBERHARDT: You published an [article on this work in *The Atlantic*](#) last year. Why did you choose *The Atlantic* to tell this story as opposed to keeping your focus on academic journals? Why this detour?

RICHESON: The short answer is they asked me to, for a special issue on race and racism in America post-George Floyd, and I took it on to challenge myself to communicate psychological science to a lay audience. But we psychological scientists don't have to do just one thing. We can do rigorous empirical research and write up papers for journals in order to contribute to the larger scientific literature. It's really important for shaping the field's thinking about these questions as well as the larger implications for intergroup relations and race relations. But, ultimately, I didn't become a social psychologist to publish journal articles. No offense, because I am happy to publish them, but I'm motivated to do this work because of concern for equity in society, justice in society, peace in society. Those are the ends, those are the goals, that's what my work is about. So, when our work has matured to a place where we can responsibly say things with confidence, then I think we have an obligation to contribute to the larger conversations in society about race and racism. Surely psychological science should be part of this larger conversation, yes?

Honestly, many of the professional service roles and activities I have taken on over the past decade, including PCAST, are not about my research but about trying to represent what our field knows collectively and making sure it's part of the conversation.

[See Jennifer Richeson's 2016 interview in Inside the Psychologist's Studio.](#)

EBERHARDT: I hear you. In the *Atlantic* article, you wrote, “This redemptive narrative not only smooths over the past but smooths over what is yet to come: It holds out the promise of an almost predestined, naturally occurring future that will be even more just and egalitarian.”

Your work outlines the costs of imagining this naturally occurring future. What are these costs?

RICHESON: This is why I think the mythology can be corrosive. There are costs associated with this narrative. For one, it can lead to a sense of complacency, especially right after something happens that is believed to be a big win, like the election of Barack Obama. Many people interpreted his election as evidence that racism was over in our country, that we are now in a “post-racial” society and can stop focusing on racial inequality. Sometimes you see this thinking in hiring or graduate or undergraduate admissions. A really diverse cohort might be admitted or even matriculate, which you immediately celebrate as evidence of change. But if the same efforts, vigilance, and attention that were required to get that cohort there in the first place are not maintained, you will immediately fall back to whatever was happening before and see the same outcomes as before. So much for progress.

In short, we tend to glom onto seemingly any evidence of progress and, I think, in a straightforward goal-pursuit way, disengage from the goal of a racially egalitarian organization (or department or university) because we have a sense that we’re back on track, we fixed “the problem.” The worst-case scenario is when we go to all these efforts but they’re not translated into any structural or policy changes. Often, they’re not even written down, and the people who worked their butts off to make it happen are off doing something else, and so people don’t know what was done, much less how to replicate it. Because we’re susceptible to this narrative, we think progress will continue no matter what we do, including if we do nothing.

EBERHARDT: Right.

RICHESON: We actually have some new data on this. Working with Michael and Brittany Torrez, a Yale School of Management graduate student, we asked people what they think the racial disparity is in the number of male CEOs who are Black versus White, now, what this disparity was in the recent past (5–6 years ago) and what they think it will be in the near future (5–6 years from now). For that near future estimate, participants were split into conditions where they were told to imagine that most private companies will adopt a relatively effective policy to increase racial diversity in upper management (e.g., targeted recruitment), adopt a fairly weak diversity initiative (e.g., bias trainings), or do nothing different.

You would think that the signal of an effective, proactive diversity effort would lead people in that condition to think that the share of Black leaders in the future would increase more than people in the other conditions thought it would. But this information did not really matter. Regardless of what condition the study participants were in, they not only thought there would be significant progress in the share of Black CEOs in the near future, but they expected the same amount of progress regardless of the diversity policy. If things are naturally getting better; there’s no need to intervene.

There are other corrosive aspects of the perception that things are automatically getting better. For instance, this perception leads some people to see efforts to increase representation or to close the racial wealth gap as discriminatory, because they think things are already equal or soon will be. They think things are fine, so why would we need any intervention? So, efforts to increase equity can trigger a sense of grievance; a concern among White Americans that they are getting discriminated against.

EBERHARDT: Yes. Those efforts can trigger a sense that things were fair before.

RICHESON: Right—”and now you’re discriminating against us.” That dynamic kicks in because people

are somewhat deluding themselves about the reality of racial inequality in contemporary society.

EBERHARDT: What would it take to disrupt the mythology that undergirds all of this?

RICHESON: Honest answer: I don't know. Interestingly, we tried to disrupt the idea that society had made a lot of racial progress from the 1960s, thinking that if we just gave people information about the continued role of racism in society, then they would realize there hadn't been as much progress as they thought. And they would update their beliefs about the current state of racial economic equality. Well, some of that happened. We told a sample of White Americans about the continuing role of racism in society—for instance the influence of implicit bias, of segregation, of educational disparities. Others were randomly assigned to read about neutral control information. Afterward, all participants were asked about their perceptions of racial wealth and income inequality today (in 2016) and in 1963. So, what happened? Well, some of our predictions were correct. Participants who read about racial bias in society did report that there's been less progress, compared to participants in the control condition, but they did not produce more accurate estimates of the racial wealth or income gaps in society today.

Instead, they shifted their estimates of the past. That is, the people who read about the persistence of racism in society tempered their expectations about how much progress toward racial equality there had been since 1963, but instead of updating their beliefs about the size of these racial gaps in the present, they seem to have decided that maybe things weren't as bad as they thought in 1963. It was the opposite of what we expected. They didn't change their beliefs about reality today, in contemporary society; they changed their beliefs about the past, estimating that racial economic inequality in the past must not have been as bad as they thought.

EBERHARDT: Wow. You talked about the federal government collecting these data and sometimes publishing these facts about wealth distribution every few years. Do you think the government could also play a role in disrupting the mythology by giving people the real numbers?

RICHESON: That's a great question. I do think trusted sources, whether the federal government or independent economists and policy centers, can have an impact in increasing awareness of these numbers on the reality of racial economic equality.

But almost every time these reports come out, they make a big splash, and for a few days everyone's outraged. And then within a couple weeks, they go back to sleep. It's hard. We don't know what to do with this information. It's so vast, which makes it helpful and useful to study, and it is such an important marker of economic well-being. We don't want to think of ourselves as having these crystallized class strata, especially in this country. We want to think that everybody's middle class; everybody can become rich if they really want to, if they work hard. We have all these other myths about what is possible, and the wealth distribution in our country just belies these myths. Wealth, especially extreme wealth, is not really accrued through hard work. In reality, wealth is typically accrued through inheritance, across generations. Your parents or grandparents earned it and you inherited it (the recent explosion of wealth in Silicon Valley notwithstanding).

All this is to say that you cannot work your way out of that whopping racial wealth gap. You can't say, "Oh, if they would just go to school and pull up their pants or not buy sneakers, then the racial wealth gap would close." None of those things are relevant to the racial wealth gap. In fact, it's the opposite.

The more wealth you have, the more likely you are to go to school, stay in school, get a good job, get a career, be healthy, for goodness' sake, and be physically able to do any of the things that allow you to accrue income and ultimately wealth.

We just have it backward in our head, and we don't know what to do with it. And race makes it even harder, because you're ultimately confronted with the fact that many Black Americans don't have a lot of wealth because they were part of somebody else's wealth, right? We were property, and nobody wants to contend with that and the reason why, of all markers of economic outcomes, the racial wealth gap is the most stubborn and the most intractable.

EBERHARDT: Wow. I'm still looking for a thread here to hang some hope on, so I'm going to ask you one final question. You were recently appointed to the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. Tell us about this and what are your hopes are.

RICHESON: [PCAST](#) is a council of advisors to the president who meet with other experts to help the president with specific issues and questions. One of the chairs is Eric Lander, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and science advisor to the president, and two academic nongovernment employees are our co-chairs. The council itself is composed of, among others, people in industry, academics in the natural and physical sciences, and a few of us in the social sciences, including me as the lone social psychologist. But for me, it's an opportunity to learn about what's happening in government. And, to contribute the collective knowledge of psychological science to help solve the country's most pressing problems.

I think we only need to look at the COVID response to know that the natural sciences and technology can only do so much, right? They've worked with the government to get the vaccine ready in record time, and we still have something like 30% of the adult population who has not taken it. This is a behavioral science problem, and the fact that so many people in and outside of government were blindsided by this level of vaccine hesitancy tells you that there have not been behavioral scientists in many of these public health conversations. The Biden–Harris administration recognized up front the need to include behavioral scientists among its science and technology advisors, and obviously that is part of why I'm there.

The Biden–Harris administration is also very committed to reducing racial inequity in general and in society. Part of the charge in all of their questions is, "How can we achieve this goal, such as increasing our economic flourishing through technology, in ways that do not increase racial disparities but in fact reduce them?" That's our charge with everything, whether it's climate impacts, COVID responses, science education, the scientific workforce, or any other priority: There's always a mandate to pay attention to racial and other forms of equality, such as rural and urban and class disparities.

So that's the charge. It's overwhelming, it's a bit scary, but it's also a potential way to have a tangible impact on our country.

EBERHARDT: Well, at APS, we would love to figure out a way to support you and to partner with you on this. Thank you, Jenn, for the work you do and also for taking a moment out of your really busy schedule to speak to the APS membership. We appreciate you, and on behalf of APS, thank you for all that you do.

RICHESON: Thank you, Madam President.

[See all columns by Jennifer L. Eberhardt](#)