

*Foreword by  
David Edmonds*

# UNDERSTANDING HUMANS

*HOW SOCIAL  
SCIENCE  
CAN HELP  
SOLVE OUR  
PROBLEMS*

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Jennifer Richeson  
on

# PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL INEQUALITY



## ABOUT THIS PODCAST

There is inequality in the United States, a fact most people accept and which data certainly bears out. But how bad do *you* think that inequality is, say, based on comparing the wealth held by the average Black person and the average white person in America? This is one of the questions that Jennifer Richeson, a social psychologist at Yale University, studies. She has news – bad news – about both the actual gap and what people think that gap is.



<https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2021/08/jennifer-richeson-on-perceptions-of-racial-inequality/>

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE BLACK-WHITE WEALTH GAP

Economists, both in government and outside, have done a great job measuring any number of disparities by social categories. In this case, we're talking about racial inequalities, in particular, racial economic inequality. The one that I focus on the most is the Black-white wealth gap, and it's staggeringly large. On average, as of 2016, the average Black family had about 10 per cent of the wealth of the average white family. So, if the average white family has \$100, then the average Black family in America has about \$10. This is huge. It's apparently gotten a little bit better, so maybe we're at about \$12 or \$13. But the important thing is it's a huge, staggering gap that has been persistent for 50/60 years.

We all are really surprised by how much disparity continues, especially in wealth, compared to what we believe. If you ask an average American, they will probably say that the wealth gap is around 65–70 per cent. It's a gap people acknowledge but it's much smaller than it actually is. It's very wrong compared to the actual wealth gap.

If you're motivated to believe that things are fair and just, when you're asked to provide these estimates, who comes to mind? There are economically successful African Americans such as Oprah, LeBron James, and other entertainers. We're trying to remind people that the richest Black Americans or the top Black billionaire is still number 76 on Forbes' list, and you can't even get their wealth on the same chart as Bezos or Zuckerberg. The magnitude is so incredibly different.

Part of the reason why we're so wrong is because we really believe that since the 1950s, '60s, '70s and '80s, things have gotten dramatically better, and are continuing to get better. So part of the reason people are so wrong today is because they think 'Well, yeah, there was a time when things were bad. Maybe in the '60s, maybe in the '70s, but we fixed all of that with laws and policies. And so now things are just fine, right?' Things are not fine. In fact, the racial wealth gap is almost as bad as it was in the '60s.

## HIGHER INCOME AMERICANS ARE MORE INACCURATE

On average, higher income Americans are more inaccurate. And that's true across the sample. This is one interesting feature: higher income

Black Americans are less wrong compared to lower income Black Americans, than higher income white Americans are to lower income white Americans. Basically, in the United States, higher income Black Americans are still embedded in a more diverse network of friends, family, and community, both socially and economically, as well as racially, than higher income white Americans. Higher income white Americans by comparison are largely, both racially and socially, economically segregated in their lives, where they live, where they work, who they talk to. There is a clear distinction, a difference where upper middle class, Black Americans still have family members who are Black, and who are in probably less well-off circumstances, and they work with relatively high income white Americans. As a result of this, they get to see the contrast of how they live and how other people live, and that helps to inform accuracy on these matters.

## *STATUS THREAT*

This is the idea that, as our nation is becoming more racially and ethnically and in some cases, religiously diverse, the groups that were dominant – meaning numerically, but also politically and economically dominant – are feeling some level of threat, concern and anxiety about what this new nation or set of people and these new circumstances that are way more diverse will mean for them. It's a vulnerability, and the sociology around this is usually called 'status threat'.

A concern about the standing of your group could be economic, it could be political, it could be cultural. Who gets to decide what holidays we celebrate and what monuments? We're contesting now in our country as to what types of people and heroes we honour publicly and whether we rethink their role in our society. All of that is being contested, in part because of the changing demographics of our nation. When you've had a bit of a monopoly on the say of how things run, then of course, any movement away from that and having these issues contested, is a bit threatening, or at least off-putting. The argument is that on average, as white Americans are thinking about this future, where their group is no longer more than 50 per cent of the population, that activates the status threat.

## *IS MERITOCRACY A LIE?*

Meritocracy is fundamental to our individual wellbeing, but also our societal wellbeing, especially in the United States, which says that it is a meritocracy. However, you cannot be a meritocracy and have this kind of fundamental racial patterning of the goods of life, including longevity, at the same time. One has to be a lie. If it's the one that's our most sacred value, which is the American dream – pull yourself up, just work hard, you will achieve – if that is fundamentally wrong, and a lie, that is incompatible with who we understand ourselves to be, which is partly why people can't come to terms with the actual degree of racial inequality in society.

SOCIAL SCIENCE BITES PRESENTS...

# Perceptions of Racial Inequality

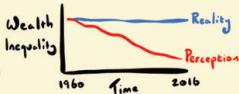
Jennifer Richeson

## How bad do you think Inequality is?

For example, comparing the wealth of the average Black and White person in the U.S.A

Most guess it has greatly decreased over time, that equality is close

**WRONG!**



In 2016 the average Black family had ~10% of the wealth of the average White family

**MASSIVE MISPERCEPTION**

We feel compelled to conform to the narrative of racial progress

The **Wealth GAP** is **Staggering** and underpins other racial inequalities



Changing Demographics & Status Threat

**TUNE IN!**