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## Measuring White Privilege in South Dakota

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# Measuring White Privilege in South Dakota

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## ABSTRACT

In 1989, Peggy McIntosh introduced the “White Privilege” survey, which was a research instrument designed to indicate day-to-day incidences of small advantages which exist in our society attached to being white. Those enrolled in the class, on average, strongly agreed more with the survey compared to the general population. This could be attributed to differences in education and the effects of race. By looking at data collected individually and across racial groups, it can be seen that there are extreme differences in outlooks on white privilege between those who are white (76% of the total sample) and those who are of other races (24% of the total sample). When compared with whites, people of other races were more likely to disagree with the questions presented in the white privilege survey. This can be attributed to the differences found in experiences of people of other races. It can stem from the notion of racism and the attention to race that causes people to judge individuals based on a group.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1989, Peggy McIntosh introduced the “White Privilege” survey, which was a research instrument designed to indicate day-to-day incidences of small advantages which exist in our society attached to being white. Since that time, the survey has been widely used to estimate differences in daily experiences across race groups. In spring 2013, the Race and Ethnic Groups class at South Dakota State University selected 10 items from the survey, added four demographic items (i.e., age, gender, race and ethnicity) and distributed the survey to both other students and to the general public in the state.

Three of the survey items focused on daily interactions and activities. Question one investigated a person's ability to be in the company of only others of their same race in daily interactions. Question two addressed one's ability to go shopping without being carefully watched by store staff, and question ten inquired whether one's race impacted their ability to rent an apartment. Questions three and four focused on social representation of race: question three asked about racial representation in local media, and question four addressed U.S. historical representation of one's race. The remaining questions focused on social perceptions of other people. Questions five and seven reflect the ability to behave either poorly or well, and not have your behavior attributed to your race. Questions six, eight and nine address the workplace and whether one is seen to have gotten their position because of "Affirmative Action" and not one's skills. The tenth question inquired as to the race of one's "boss" or other persons in authority in the workplace.

For this analysis, two research questions emerged: How do student answers to Peggy McIntosh's (1989) white privilege survey differ from that of the general population in the state of South Dakota? How does race affect respondents' answers towards a white privilege survey? Differences between groups of respondents are important to understand, as they will indicate the degree and nature of daily inequalities found in experiences of people of other races in our state. These differences, too, can stem from the notion of racism and the attention to race that causes people to judge individuals based on their racial group (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012).

## **METHODS**

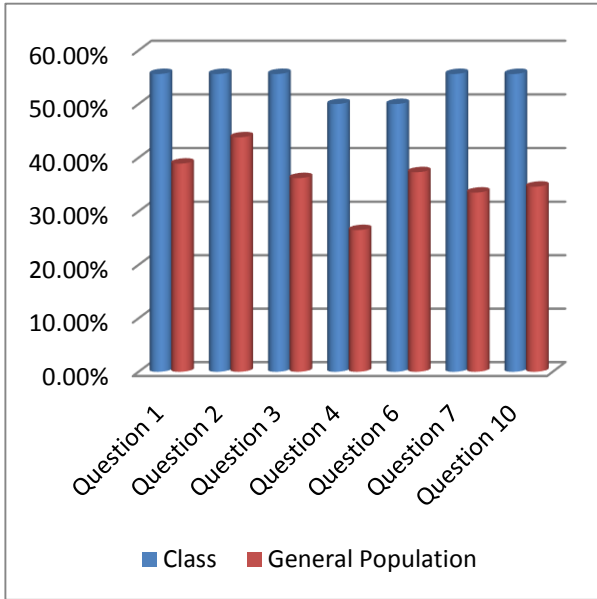
Members of the on-line Spring 2013 Race and Ethnic Groups course participated in distributing a 14 item survey to measure levels of white privilege in South Dakota populations. Surveys were distributed through convenience sample to both students and members of the general public above the age of 18. As the course was offered on-line, respondents represent populations in all areas of the state. In addition, the students in the course also responded to the survey separately, and used their personal responses for comparative analysis. There were 202 valid responses used in the analysis for each item; of these 76% self-identified as white and 24% self-identified as a race other than white.

Data was entered and analyzed through cross-tabulation tables, which allowed for several comparisons. First, survey responses between students and the general public were contrasted both for demographic composition and for item responses. Second, demographic comparisons in responses were also analyzed through cross-tabulation tables. Last, individual student responses to White Privilege items were considered in relation to the general public, and to the results of other course members.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

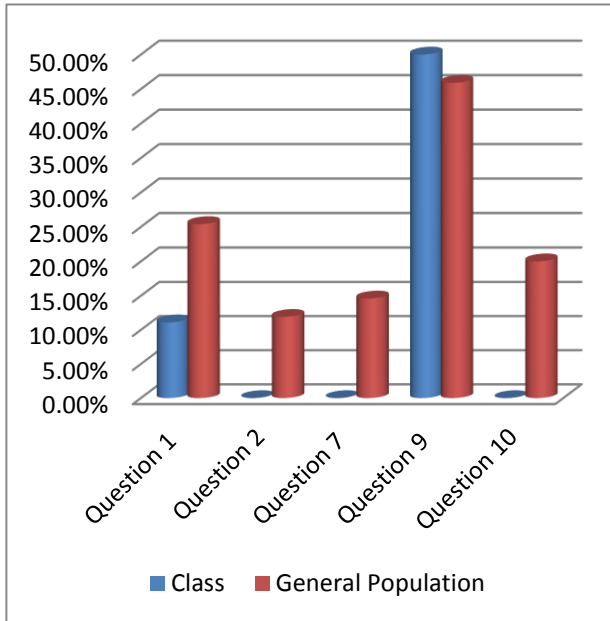
### **Student and General Public Comparisons**

The individuals from the class were, overall, more likely to strongly agree with the questions presented in the white privilege survey, indicating high levels of white privilege experiences. In seven of the ten questions, students from the class strongly agreed by 50 percent or more (See Figure 1). There wasn't a single question where the general population strongly agreed by 50 percent or more. In the five out of the seven questions that student respondents answered strongly agree, students strongly agreed by 55.6 percent. By answering strongly agree in regards to question one, they conceded that they can be in the company of people of their own race if so desired. Students also strongly agreed by 55.6 percent that they can shop without harassment (#2), that their race is widely represented on television (#3), that they can do well without being called a credit to their race (#7), and that they can choose a place to live without discrimination based on skin color (#10).



**Figure 1. Percentages of responses that strongly agree to questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 10 for student participants and the general public.**

However, the general population was less likely to strongly agree and more likely to disagree than the students. In question number one indicating that one didn't need to mix with other races, the general population only strongly agreed by 38.9 percent contrasting with 55.6% of students as noted above. Equally important, 25.4 percent of the general public disagreed with this statement, whereas only 11.1 percent of students did so. Responses to other questions indicate the same pattern. In questions two, seven, and ten none of the students from the class disagreed (indicating a high level of white privilege), whereas the general population as a whole disagreed by 11.9 percent, 14.5 percent, and 20.0 percent, respectively (indicating lower levels) (See Figure 2).



**Figure 3. Percentages of responses that disagree to questions 1, 2, 7, 9, and 10 for student participants and the general public.**

The disparities found between students and the general population might be due to participation in a class that deals with multiculturalism. By engaging in classes that bring out the “prickly” subjects, a person is more likely to examine privileges granted to majority groups, in this instance whites, and recognize its affects. As Kottak and Kozaitis (2012) stated, “understanding of cultural diversity and the implementation of culturally informed policies and programs are fundamental to a healthy multicultural society.” Courses in multiculturalism can help a student better understand the world and the perspectives of those that are different. It can help them better understand those around them (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012).

A course focused on multiculturalism also brings a holistic approach that allows people to step outside of themselves, their backgrounds, and their influences and take a look at the whole human condition (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012). In a study done with predominantly white counselors, it was found that they were more open to the ideas of white privilege after they confronted white privilege. By confronting the issue, they became aware of its

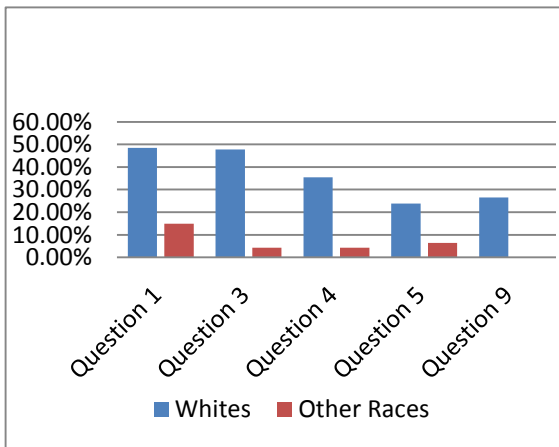
effects on those of different races. Multiculturalism in education is an important tool that facilitates understanding and acceptance of white privilege (Hays et al., 2008). It has been found that the introduction of white privilege helps students better understand the effects of racism and white privilege on those of other races as long as students aren't feeling personally attacked (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012). By being introduced to these topics in class, students might be more open to admitting and identifying with white privilege and the majority group.

Another reason the class may have differed from the general population is the fact that many of the students are white (over 90% of the student population identified as white). As a larger portion of respondents of the general public were of other races (24%), we would expect them to disagree more with the idea of white privilege being prevalent in their lives. These respondents may have experienced the repercussions of stereotypes. Stereotypes, as defined by Kottak and Kozaitis (2012) "are fixed ideas, often unfavorable, about what members of a group are like." The stereotypes that have been placed on groups of people, mainly people of minority groups, have caused people to judge the acts of others based on a group. These stereotypes could have led to differences in being watched while shopping (#2), in being called a "credit to their race" (#7) and in having access to apartment rentals (#10).

However, both groups disagreed that if asked to see someone in charge, they would see someone of their own race (#9). The disagreement with this question might be related to the negative feelings towards affirmative action and the Equal Opportunity Employers Commission (EEOC). These are both areas that either aim to increase representation of African Americans, women, and other minorities in education and employment or aim to keep discriminatory practices out of institutions (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012). Members of the majority group may feel a "reverse" discrimination because of affirmative action or Equal Opportunity, such as in case of the Center for Individual Rights in Washington D.C. suing the University of Michigan on behalf of white students. Their claim was that the students weren't admitted to the university because of the lower standards placed on minorities in order for the university to secure diversity (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012). This demonstrates the animosity felt towards affirmative action and the Equal Opportunity Employers Commission (EEOC).

## Comparison of Responses in White and Nonwhite Populations

Whites, based on the collection of data, experience the day to day privileges of being white. While they may not realize how being the “norm” affects their everyday lives, they benefit from it through various ways. From not experiencing harassment while shopping (#2) to seeing their race widely represented on television (#3), they enjoy the privileges of being white (See Figure 3). Even defining someone who isn’t white as the “other” race admits that not being white doesn’t fit the norm. Although those in power aren’t necessarily white throughout the world and white privilege doesn’t necessarily mean that every white person has power and influence, defining race is a way of granting privileges to the majority groups. The majority group, in the instance of our state, is composed of those of the white race. Defining race has served as a way of separating people from each other and creating superiority over others (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012).

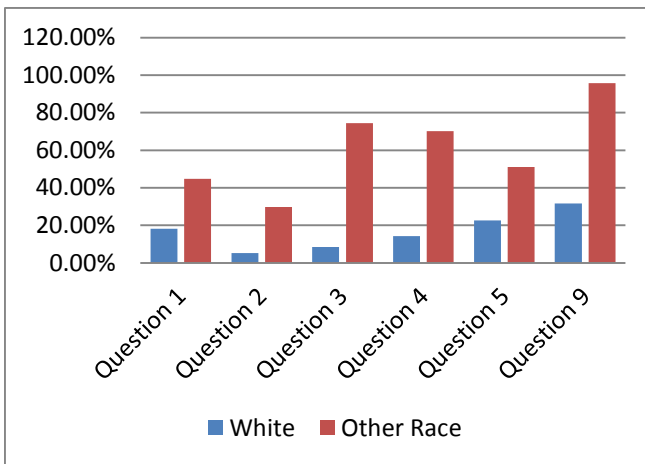


**Figure 4. Percentages of responses that strongly agree to questions 1, 3, 4, 5, and 9 for whites and other races.**

White advantages even include being able to be in the company of their own race, if so desired. Out of the white respondents that answered the survey, 44.8 percent strongly agreed that they could be only in the company of their own race (#1), whereas nonwhite respondents disagreed by 44.7 percent. 47.7 percent of white respondents also strongly agreed that they could turn on the television and see their race represented (#2) (See Figure



3). Respondents from other races disagreed with this by 74.5 percent. Other “daily life” indicators showed the same pattern. White respondents expressed that they didn’t feel as if using bad language, dressing in second hand clothes, and not answering letters would cause others to judge these acts as evidence of the poor moral choice, poverty, or illiteracy of all white people (#5). They agreed by 53.5 percent that people would not attribute these things to their race. However, respondents of other races disagreed by 51.1 percent, indicating that these choices have been or would be attributed to their race in the same social settings (See Figure 4).



**Figure 5. Percentages of responses that disagree to questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 9 for whites and other races.**

Institutional and economic items show the same results. When indicating whether our national heritage was represented by members of their race (#4), white respondents agreed by 55.6 percent. However, nonwhites disagreed by 70.2 percent with this same question. White respondents also agreed by 41.9 percent that, if asked to see the person in charge, they would see someone of their race. Respondents of other races disagreed by this notion by 95.7 percent. Race has been socially and economically important because of the unequal distribution of resources, such as employment and education, to those of color (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012).

Racism perpetuates the notion that certain groups of people are superior to others. This can even influence the feelings of people towards certain groups of people (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012). Prejudices towards certain groups can cause a devaluing of a group, thus placing superiority over them. These prejudices might cause someone to judge the use of foul language, second hand clothes, and unanswered letters in question five as something that everyone of other races do because of their inferiority (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012). Prejudices and racism could perhaps have caused respondents of other races to feel as if they are being judged by their actions based on their race, which could have caused people of other races to disagree with question five. When presented with the notion of being able to shop without harassment in question two, whites only disagreed with this by 5.2 percent, whereas respondents of other races disagreed with this notion by 29.8 percent. These differences in answers could perhaps be attributed to silent racism, which could cause employees at stores to be more racially aware of those of other races. This racial awareness, caused by silent racism, could cause them to harass someone of the other race because they might be expecting this person to steal. By judging individuals by the stereotypes of a group, believing in inherent differences, and being racially aware of those around them, whites are exhibiting silent racism upon those of other races (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012).

## Unpacking White Privilege at the Individual Level

My own responses, compared to the general public, are different and are more like those of my classmates. I answered strongly agree with all of the survey questions. Even though the general public didn't answer strongly agree like I did on all of the questions, they still agreed by a higher percentage than they disagreed in nine out of ten questions. This suggests a strong connection of the general population with the majority group, as the class and I also reflected in our answers.

The reason why my answers differed somewhat from whites in the general public could be from a multitude of different reasons, ranging from my gender, to my race, to my age. All of these concepts are discussed in the book and are determinants for outcomes. Gender can influence a person's responses by causing someone not to experience the effects of white privilege as acutely. Women have been struggling to achieve equality in the work place,

such as “equal pay for equal work” (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012). These struggles to achieve equality can cause feelings of less connection with the majority group. Race can affect a person’s survey answers because a white person would experience the privileges associated with a majority group more than someone of a different race would. Racism could cause those of a different race to feel that white privilege is extremely prominent for whites, but would not be as apparent in their own lives (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012). Age could also be a determinant in someone’s answer. Someone of an older generation might have different political and social views, based on their life experiences and the generation in which they were raised (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2012).

These different views could cause a different view on white privilege. I am a white woman and have the option of being in the company of someone of my own race most of the time. I do not feel I am being judged by others based on my race, which is a manifestation of white privilege. I am a woman and, although white women may not experience the same levels of white privilege as white men, I feel that I have experienced enough white privilege in my everyday life to warrant admittance of white privilege.

## CONCLUSION

This collection of data from students and from the general population demonstrates the white privilege that South Dakotans experience. As noted earlier, the class strongly agreed with seven out of the ten questions in the survey. By strongly agreeing with these seven questions-which includes five out of the seven at 55.6 percent strongly agreeing- the class has demonstrated a strong affiliation with the majority group and to experiencing the small daily advantages that come with that affiliation. Even a majority of the general population, which didn’t strongly agree as much as the class, agreed with nine out of ten of the survey questions. The class and white members of the general public experience white privilege in their everyday lives, whether they are aware of these privileges or not. South Dakotans have originated from many European immigrants, which tend to be white. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 84.4 percent of South Dakota is composed of white individuals, compared with 63.4 percent for all of the United States. Blacks make up 1.9 percent of South Dakota, whereas they make up 13.1 percent in the United States. People of Hispanic or Latino origin make up 2.9 percent of the South Dakota population, whereas they make

up 16.7 percent of the United States. The only minority group that has higher rates in South Dakota is Native Americans, who make up 8.9 percent of the population compared with 1.2 percent for the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Although increasing diversity has been coloring the canvas of South Dakota, it still has a very white surface. South Dakotans, because of the fact that they are more likely to fall within the majority group, experience a higher than average white privilege compared to other places in the United States.

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